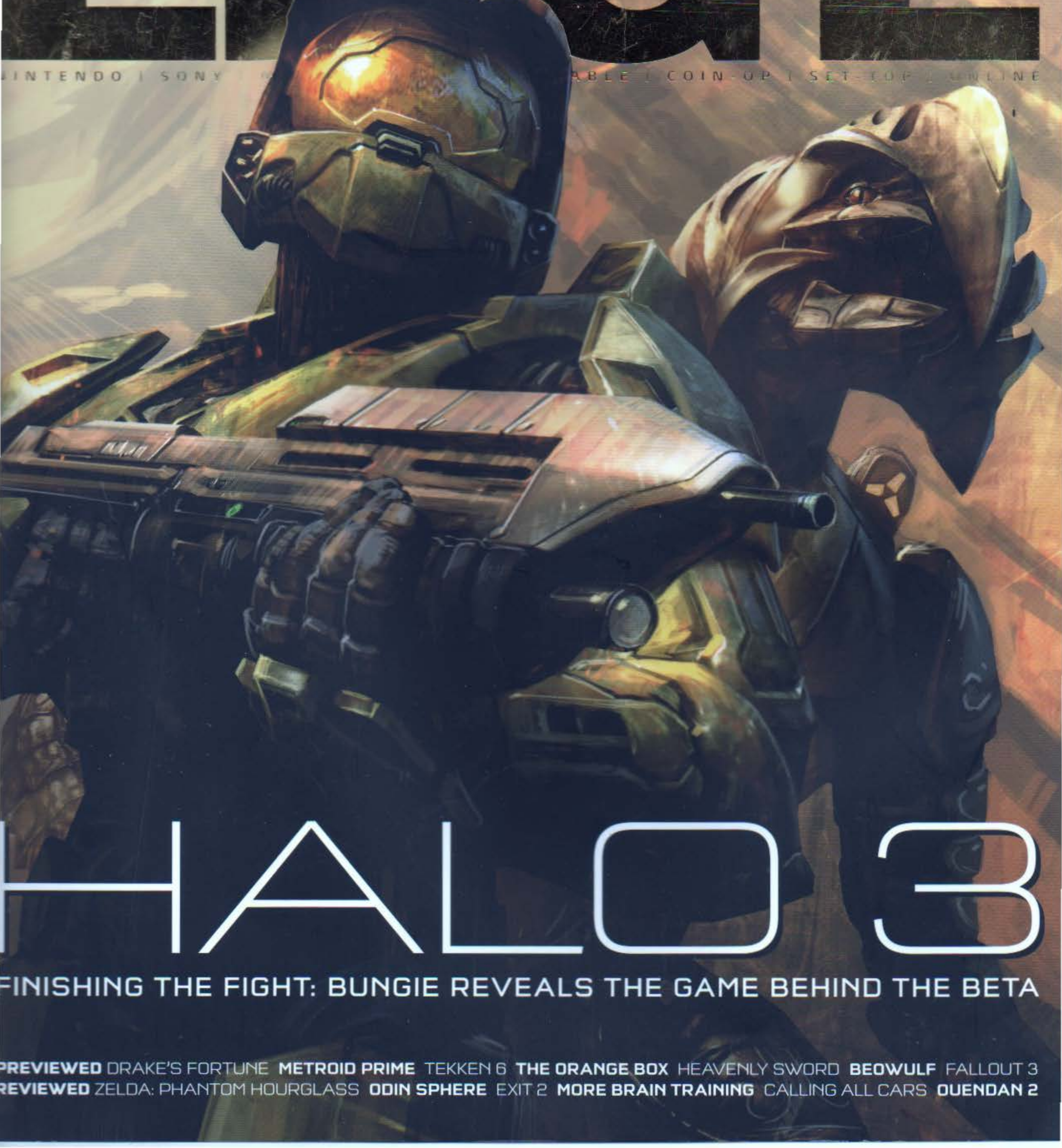
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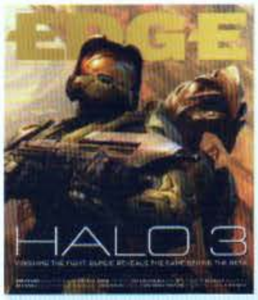
HALO 3

FINISHING THE FIGHT: BUNGIE REVEALS THE GAME BEHIND THE BETA

PREVIEWED DRAKE'S FORTUNE **METROID PRIME** TEKKEN 6 **THE ORANGE BOX** HEAVENLY SWORD **BEOWULF** FALLOUT 3

REVIEWED ZELDA: PHANTOM HOURGLASS **ODIN SPHERE** EXIT 2 **MORE BRAIN TRAINING** CALLING ALL CARS **OUENDAN 2**





Whatever your opinion of the big console makers' performance in the current generation to date, it's difficult to argue that any of these players had a genuinely poor E3. Each showed provocative line-ups, made confident claims, and displayed mutually distinct strategies.

Microsoft showed Xbox 360 to be efficiently consolidating itself further with hobbyist gamers. Many of its range of high-quality games may fail to introduce it to new markets, but the dazzlingly assured *Halo 3*, whose campaign and other modes we finally play this month (see p66), should at least bring new standards to its genre.

Nintendo continued to demonstrate its grasp of the wider markets that Microsoft cannot yet reach. The delicate game/leisure/sport hybrid of *Wii Fit* certainly confused many in the audience at its press conference, but it's a clear continuation of the 'blue ocean' strategy Nintendo began with its Wii and DS launches. Indeed, just after the event, the company announced that it had reached 3m Wiis sold in Japan, while reports appeared talking of Japanese TV execs blaming the console's popularity for unprecedented lows in primetime TV viewing figures in the region.

E3 also confirmed that Sony, that new black sheep of the industry, is still a company it would be unwise to underestimate. Its vision for PlayStation Network could eclipse the remake-and-reiterate blandness that Xbox 360's Marketplace still exhibits, representing an eye for imagination that many Microsoft releases appear to lack. And though many of Sony's second-generation PS3 games, which we preview from p32, may appear little more than updates of the kind of games that did so much to sell previous hardware, the likes of *Eye Of Judgement* show a commitment to fresh ideas that could see PS3 in some way bridging the broadening culture gap between 360 and Wii.

As always, the future of the videogame industry is still very much unwritten – but at the same time rarely has it seemed so plump with promise.



EDGE

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"If you were in my toilet I wouldn't bother flushing it."

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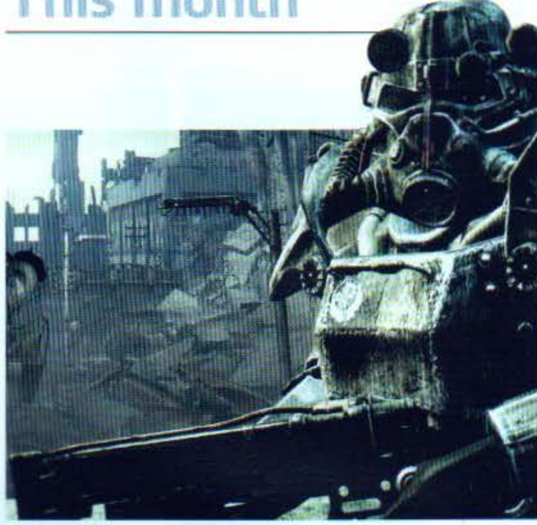
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Review



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E3



EVENT

Peter Moore led the Microsoft cheerleading in Santa Monica (below), but the showman in him truly came out when given the opportunity to join some of the Harmonix team to demo *Rock Band* (main). Fortunately, he managed to bring the performance to a halt only twice, by mistakenly pausing the action



The new, not improved, greatest show on earth

A fresh location, a different format, and a clutch of innovative gaming pursuits combine to shape the industry's downsized annual get-together

No one really knew what to expect from the new E3 event, which took place in Santa Monica from July 11-13, not the companies exhibiting their wares, the journalists in attendance to see them, nor the various hoteliers whose meeting rooms, suites and ballrooms played host to wheezing dev kits, tired-looking developers and token sprinklings of promotional trinkets. But, over the course of its three days, it became clear that this was an E3 like no other that had preceded it – and, most probably, none that will follow.

It began, tellingly enough, with Microsoft hosting E3's first ever outdoor press conference at 8pm the evening prior to the beginning of the event proper, at Santa Monica High School's auditorium, its concrete seating made more bearable by hundreds of circular Xbox 360 cushions. The lights dimmed, Marty O'Donnell's famous score began, then a portion of the stage became illuminated and realisation dawned: the opening of what was always called the greatest videogame show on earth was to be marked by the efforts of five hardcore *Halo* fans who'd taught themselves to play game music (Xbox chief **Peter Moore**: "When we saw them on the internet we just had to share their passion with you"). They could certainly play; unfortunately few in the audience wanted to listen, eager instead to see what Moore had up his sleeves along with those tattooed arms. For Microsoft, E3 was to be all about games out in 2007, an effort to show just how superior its roster looks compared to its competitors' in the all-important Christmas rush.

So it was down to business, and demos or at the very least trailers of a hulking line-up of software – or, as Peter Moore termed it, "the greatest game line-up in videogame history"

So it was down to business, and demos or at the very least trailers of a hulking line-up of software – or, as Moore termed it, "the greatest videogame line-up in videogame history." There was *Rock Band*, *Mass Effect*, *Halo 3*, *Lost Odyssey*, *BioShock*, *Project Gotham Racing 4*, *Call Of Duty 4*, *GTAIV*, and countless more titles, all of which will clearly maintain some kind of momentum for Xbox 360, which, according to official data, now has an installed base of 5.6m in the US, where it is outselling PS3 by a ratio of two to one, and accounts for more software sales than Sony's console and Nintendo's Wii combined.

Other key messages? By the end of the year, over 100 Xbox Live Arcade titles will be available. Xbox Live membership now stands at over 7m, with take-up expected to reach 10m by mid-2008. Xbox 360 Elite will launch in the UK on August 24. *Gears Of War* is coming to Windows, featuring brand-new content. And Xbox 360 *GTAIV* will receive two exclusive expansions by spring 2008. Plenty for fans of the platform to be excited about, then, although the goodwill appeared to evaporate when Moore closed the event by revealing a *Halo 3*-branded Xbox 360, an announcement that managed to





Microsoft took over the entire Viceroy Hotel during E3, and made sure that visitors had plenty of space to chill out (above). The HDMI-enabled *Halo 3* 360 (left)





It didn't get more West Coast than at Shutters On The Beach (below), the hotel adopted during E3 by the likes of Sony Online Entertainment and Capcom (right). Meanwhile, the Barker Hangar (far right) with its attendant 'facilities' offered some contrast







One of the few surprises among Microsoft's showings was *Scene-It*, based on the popular DVD-and-boardgame combo and making use of a new Xbox 360 controller (right) that may recall something you've seen before

attract a couple of polite handclaps, and not a single holler, nor a solitary whoop. A negative end to a promising beginning for E3 2007.

Meanwhile, at a fashionably dimly lit sushi bar across town, Sony Computer Entertainment worldwide studios chief Phil Harrison was preparing to introduce the world's first showing of *Killzone 2* – the real *Killzone 2*, finally, 26 months after it debuted in infamous prerendered form at E3 2005 – to a super-select band of 150 journos, industry analysts and other special guests. Ushered along groups at a time into a projection room accessed via a rear door, few in attendance expected it to truly match the quality of what was once promised. And it didn't. Importantly, though, it came much closer than anyone had reasonably expected, the developer-driven playthrough lighting up the screen with smooth-moving, complex action but falling short in terms of facial animation and some of the other incidental details that so clearly marked out the original footage as prerendered. Importantly for such a presentation, however, it lacked theatricality: where E3 2006's *Gears Of War* demo culminated in a screen-filling enemy breaking its way through the earth's crust, after which the game's heroes escaped in a helicopter, the *Killzone 2* sequence ended with the player taking out a static and decidedly non-threatening-looking gun emplacement. Harrison later explained to us outside of the event that the demo was a runthrough of an entire level from the game (the third, in fact), and was therefore assembled to be representative of genuine gameplay above all else. We left buoyed by *Killzone 2*'s technology, and hopeful that its gameplay's challenges will include memorable encounters that make interesting use of it.

Newswire



Microsoft talks the Torque

Announced shortly after the launch of Microsoft's XNA Creators Club (creators.xna.com) in December, GarageGames' Torque X engine is now available for free download via Microsoft's website. Designed specifically with XNA's technical specs in mind, the C#-based toolset couples its fully featured engine to a simple drag-and-drop construction interface, the Torque Game Builder. Already employed by the Ron Gilbert/Penny Arcade collaboration *On The Rain-Slick Precipice Of Darkness* and described by developer Hothead Games as a '+6 dagger of coding', Torque promises intuitive control over particle, lighting and shader effects, and efficient methods for documenting and debugging. In keeping with the XNA spirit, the X edition guarantees royalty-free licensing and comprehensive guides to the amateur development process.

SHANE KIM, corporate vice president, Microsoft Game Studios

On the first day of E3 proper, we were given the chance to talk with the man calling the shots over the likes of *Halo 3*, *Gears Of War*, and much more.

Which upcoming titles do you think Edge readers should be most excited about?
Well, of course, *Halo 3*. *Halo* is the biggest title and franchise in our industry, and *Halo 3* is going to be a monster. It's coming in September, which isn't that far away, and it's big enough for people to enjoy it for a long time. In general, we have a great line-up – how do I prioritise all these great titles? *BioShock*, *Mass Effect*, *PGR4*, *Blue Dragon*... One of the great things I think about our portfolio is that a) It's one of the greatest in the history of the industry, and b) It has something for everyone. I think if you ask ten 360 owners what their most wanted five are, then you're going to get ten different lists, even if *Halo 3* is on every one. We have that strength across the board, whether you're into racing, shooting, or RPGs. Of course, we have the mega-hits – for Europe there's *FIFA*, which might be on many people's list.

Some people think that your lead over Sony is already too great for it to be able to recover. What's your opinion?
We would never underestimate Sony. They've earned their right and their position in this industry with the accomplishments of PlayStation and PlayStation 2. That said, I don't know what the future holds or what's going to take them back to that position – I didn't see anything today at their press conference that made me think: 'That's going to sell the system'. Yeah, *Metal Gear Solid 4* looks like it could be fantastic but that's a long time away, and between now and then we have an unbelievable line-up. Playstation Home? Well, every home needs a foundation, and in terms of that market we've got a great leadership with Xbox Live. I don't know what it's going to be – it's certainly not a $100 price cut, especially when that's only for a model they're phasing out anyway. You tell me what it is that going's to flip the PlayStation 3's fortunes. It's not Blu-ray – the customer market isn't at a point where that's a killer app. You can only push the PlayStation brand and brand loyalty so far.

Do you think Sony is relying too much on its brand?
Sony's a very strong brand, and again they've earned that. But we've got a great brand as well with the Xbox, and we're still building that. I'll be honest – there are one or two thirdparty exclusives they still have that we'd love to see on 360. But I'd put our firstparty releases up against theirs any day of the week, and we've said before that we have a longterm strategy, and parties are going to have to support multiple platforms. They're going to support Xbox 360. The playing field is going to get more and more level. We go for quality over quantity and deliver more titles that people care about.

So you don't see Sony's firstparty releases as







In terms of game unveilings, Nintendo's conference at the Santa Monica Auditorium was rather flat, although it did present the Wii Zapper (below left) and the spectacle of Shigeru versus Reggie at *Wii Fit*

At 9am the following day at the Santa Monica Civic Auditorium, it was Nintendo's turn to show its hand to an audience eager to see precisely how this most disruptive organisation intended to shake things up some more. "My name is Reggie," began Nintendo Of America's president and COO to appropriate chuckling as he took position on stage, "and I am... happy." Happy because apparently 69% of all industry growth this year can be attributed to sales of Nintendo products. Because Nintendo apparently enjoys a gender split of 67% men to 33% women compared to the industry average of 80% to 20%. Because thirdparty publishers are aligning themselves with Nintendo hardware at a terrific rate, resulting in 140 DS and 100 Wii titles set to appear in North America alone before Christmas 2007. And because Wii console sales are apparently set to overtake Xbox 360 numbers "very soon".

The bigger message in all of this, though, was delivered by NCL president Satoru Iwata, who pledged that the company would continue to reach out to those who didn't previously play by simply making games with universal appeal, games that may be understood by novices but with enough depth to keep hobbyists engrossed.

So, just as *Super Mario Galaxy* was passed over at E3 2006 when once it would have been a focal point for an entire presentation, so too did Nintendo relegate *Mario Kart Wii* to the merest of glimpses, although the game did benefit from additional exposure thanks to the unveiling of an official steering-wheel Remote attachment that, along with the other add-on announced at the event, the Wii Zapper, is simply a piece of plastic into which your Wii controller neatly slots.

Why all the peripherals when the Wii Remote was supposed to be a catch-all controller, and indeed was presented as such in Nintendo's original Wii promo video, its assortment of players using it as a tennis racquet, a fishing rod, a cleaver, and so on? Nintendo has simply decided that, as it makes further inroads into the ranks of those who did not previously play games habitually, it needs to make



The Wii Balance Board (tentative title) contains four pressure sensors, and will be bundled with software that will, among other activities, simulate hula hooping (above). Nintendo has yet to release price details, but we're led to believe that it will clock in at a massmarket-friendly £50 in the UK



The big question

How do Nintendo's key creatives see its future?

With the press conference climaxing with *Wii Fit*, it was left to an exclusive session with Shigeru Miyamoto and Eiji Aonuma for journos to quiz Nintendo about the company's direction. Does *Phantom Hourglass'* simplified control scheme (and the game's sell-out success in Japan to date) mean that further *Zeldas* will all feature simplified control? We'll have to see how the game sells in the west, apparently. But Aonuma also said, tellingly: "It's about creating something that will appeal to a vast audience." Miyamoto is known to have been deflated by *Twilight Princess'* mediocre sales in Japan, so it seems certain that the duo's work will gain even more accessibility – even though we're assured that *Galaxy* will provide a challenge.

having any real strength?
They're spending an awful lot on firstparty development. But what is their answer to *Halo 3*? What's their answer to *Gears Of War*? What's their answer to *Mass Effect*? *Forza Motorsport 2* has seized the mantle that once belonged to *Gran Turismo*. In terms of their firstparty releases, what did we have today? *Heavenly Sword*, *LittleBigPlanet*... and the latter looks pretty cool. But what else have they got? I don't know what *Folklore* is, *Gran Turismo*'s a way off... The most exciting thing they showed today was *MGS4*, again.

> "Sony have earned their position in this industry. That said, I don't know what the future holds or what's going to take them back to that position – I haven't seen anything and thought: 'That's going to sell the system'"

But with things like *LittleBigPlanet* and Home, as well as the likes of *Wii Fit*, it looks like your competitors are innovating more than you. You seem to be working in established spaces, albeit often making a really good job of it. *Halo 3* isn't the first ever FPS, after all, but it does what it does exceptionally well...
Saying that *Halo 3* isn't an innovation? Come on. I think people sometimes equate innovation with 'wildly different'. I'd argue that *Halo 2* was less about the fact that it's a firstperson shooter than it is its online innovation, [offering] a completely new infrastructure. There were a lot of innovations there, and there'll be a lot of innovations in *Halo 3*. Look at *Forza Motorsport 2* in terms of the structure around the game – the options for user-generated content. It's not *LittleBigPlanet*'s own unique perspective, but that doesn't mean it's not innovative. The *Scene It* controller, the big-button pad – that's going to be great and a lot of people are going to find that intuitive and a new way of controlling things. I don't have to tell you about the popularity of *Buzz*.

Or *Scene It*'s similarities.
Maybe so, but look, how do you do a quiz game without a big button? *Buzz* didn't invent that.

Do you think Microsoft may still be a bit too focused on the 'space marine' genre, for want of a better term?
We always need to carry the hearts and minds of the core gamers, and we don't make any apologies for that. But stuff like *Halo*, as well as being a great shooter, is a great entertainment product – you've seen the short film that was created in-game today, for example, and that's a great asset that people will want to use. Of course we concentrate on stuff like Master Chief. It's like Nintendo and Mario – of course they're going to use him.

But nowadays Nintendo no longer seems to be so dependent on that one character as a flagship brand.
Fair enough. Nintendo have a strong line-up with *Zelda* and *Pokémon* and the like. We're trying to do that and broaden our portfolio, and you can see with the likes of *Gears Of War* that we can create flagship brands. We need the consumer to see that the 360 is not just for the hardcore gamer, it is a great consumer entertainment device. For the text-message generation that is growing up and expects videochat, downloadable hubs, and an integrated media centre, on Xbox 360 that's very seamless.

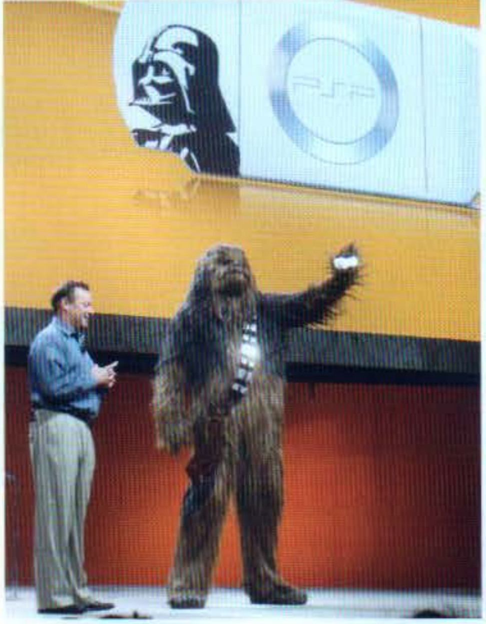
How would you summarise Microsoft's message at E3?
Right here, right now. This is going to be the greatest holiday our industry has ever seen, and the best place to celebrate that holiday is on Xbox 360. That is the complete focus for us. We didn't have a lot of huge announcements – although *Resident Evil 5* is huge. But everything apart from that game is released this year, they're 2007 titles. That's an amazing line-up.

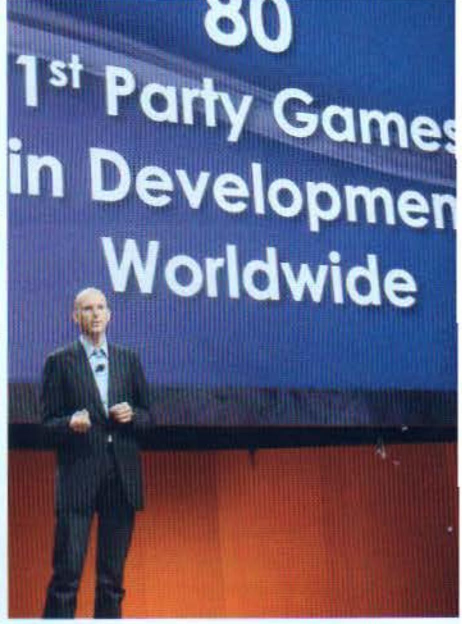


Why did you decide not to even mention *Gears 2*?
Gears 2? I don't know what that is, to be honest. [Grins] What are you talking about? *Gears* is going to the PC.

Will it be a better conversion than *Halo 2* was on PC?
You're so mean. They're going to do a great job. *Gears* for Windows will have a lot of new features and content. It'll be great.







Kaz Hirai demonstrates the ability of the new PSP (below) to output video to external screens; Jack Tretton has a 'comedy moment' with some character or other; Phil Harrison underlines firstparty commitment to PS3



its gaming experiences more immediately familiar and therefore comfortable: these plastic 'sleeves' do not change the Remote's functionality, but they certainly make it seem less abstract.

If familiarity is now another watchword to add to Nintendo's growing list, its big E3 reveal hit the right note: the Wii Balance Board that accompanies its *Wii Fit* software looks like a set of sleek bathroom scales. To many of the game journos in the audience who'd so keenly thrown themselves at the trays of free doughnuts in the lobby on the way in, though, it seemed like some kind of elaborate, sick joke. But *Wii Fit* simply isn't for them. Or is it? Nintendo has turned many hundreds of thousands of people into gamers by simply hitting on the right type of gaming for those people; perhaps it can transform exercise-phobes by melding proper physical movement – not just Wii Remote/Nunchuk gesticulation – with gaming pursuits (as well as aerobic and yogic exercise programmes, the *Wii Fit* software includes a simplistic ski-jump sim, a football-heading game, and an increasingly complex sink-the-balls-down-the-holes-by-tilting-the-play-area game). We'll see.

To many of the game journos in the audience who'd so keenly thrown themselves at the trays of free doughnuts in the lobby, Wii Fit seemed like some kind of elaborate, sick joke

The one company to keep its regular E3 press conference home was Sony Computer Entertainment, whose Sony Pictures Culver City studio-lot location was decked out with a different class of décor, underlining the host's continued determination to pull things off with style.

At 11:30am, the conference began, and, as usual with SCE, it was a packed schedule, taking in every strand of the PlayStation business. Highlights: Home continues to evolve, with new environments both exterior and interior; SCE America chief Jack Tretton announces that SCE expects to ship 9m PSPs this year; SCE big boss Kaz Hirai unveils a remodelled PSP (33% lighter, 19% slimmer, and with extended battery life); Tretton returns to talk with Chewbacca about the PSP Star Wars Entertainment Pack, which will be packed in with *Star Wars Battlefront: Renegade Squadron*; it is announced that PlayStation Network has delivered over 20m downloads since its launch, attracting 2m users to date; SCE worldwide studios head Phil Harrison shows off a slew of new PSP software including *Echochrome*, along with PS3 highlights such as *Wipeout HD*, then reveals that PlayStation Home will also feature a mobile phone component, allowing access to certain features on the move; it's revealed that SCE plans to have shipped 11m PS3s to retail by the end of 2007; while Ubi's *Haze* and Midway's *Unreal Tournament* will initially be rarities in the form of PS3 exclusives. And, among all this, there were stacks of other games (many featured on the facing page).

The session ended with Harrison pretending to forget that there was something else on the agenda, but there it finally was for all to see: a section of the *Killzone 2* demo from the previous evening, once more played through in realtime. And then some of the biggest applause to



PlayStation 3 uncut

Sony moves to reposition its console, amid some confusion

An almost-inevitable US PlayStation 3 pricecut was announced in July, shifting it from $599 to $499 and within touching distance of the $479 Xbox 360 Elite. It turned out, however, that the move applied to the 60GB model which is being phased out to be replaced throughout August by an 80GB version, which will carry the $599 tag. But it was still enough to see weekly PS3 sales overtake Xbox 360 numbers in the US for the first time in several months. Meanwhile, no price cut has been announced for Europe, but SCEE has taken the step of bundling the PS3 hardware with *MotorStorm*, *Resistance* and an extra Sixaxis controller for the original price of £425 (and embark on a new ad campaign – see above).







A new iteration of Home was at the centre of SCE's press conference, introducing a patio barbecue, a new hub entitled 'Home Square', and custom, game-specific costumes, as modelled by Phil Harrison's avatar



Project Gotham Racing 4

FORMAT: **360** PUBLISHER: **MICROSOFT**
DEVELOPER: **BIZARRE** RELEASE: **Q4 2007**

An 'international festival of speed and style' is the goal for Bizarre's latest iteration of the series that really began life on Dreamcast, the style part arriving partly thanks to the presence of motorbikes and the tricks and gestures their riders can pull off. Side note: this had the best rain effects of any game at E3.



Viva Piñata: Party Animals

FORMAT: **360** PUBLISHER: **MICROSOFT**
DEVELOPER: **KROME** RELEASE: **Q4 2007**

The original's deep strategy arguably may not have sat well with Microsoft's magic target market: families. This is a *Mario Party*-style affair, with minigames and racing flavoured by those distinctive piñatas, which might go some way to widening the 360's software credentials beyond the hobbyist.



Fable 2

FORMAT: **360** PUBLISHER: **MICROSOFT**
DEVELOPER: **LIONHEAD** RELEASE: **Q3 2008**

The focus of *Fable 2*'s E3 demo was combat, which is being engineered so that only one context-sensitive button will be required to pull off any type of attack, from slashing with a sword to pinning an enemy up against a wall to picking up a bottle and using it as a projectile. And, in the demo at least, it worked.



Mass Effect

FORMAT: **360** PUBLISHER: **MICROSOFT**
DEVELOPER: **BIOWARE** RELEASE: **NOVEMBER**

"Shepard, your species has to learn its place," a line delivered by the character Saren, was the E3 trailer's cue that *Mass Effect* may be ready to deliver on the promise of big decisions in a universal context. That aside, the demo BioWare staged was much improved graphically and aurally. For some, game of the show.



LittleBigPlanet

FORMAT: **PS3** PUBLISHER: **SCE**
DEVELOPER: **MEDIA MOLECULE** RELEASE: **Q4 2007**

In the sea of trailers at Sony's press conference, this stood out like a glinting jewel, such is the contrast between its ideas and presentation and most other games' driving-shooting-combat excesses. Hands-on time with a new build revealed its editing mode to be brilliantly simple and immediately rewarding.



Pain

FORMAT: **PS3** PUBLISHER: **SOE**
DEVELOPER: **IDOL MINDS** RELEASE: **2008**

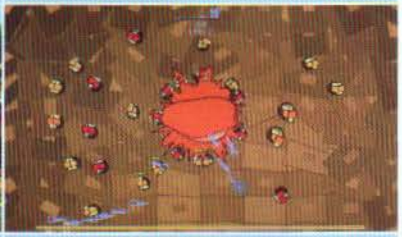
A PlayStation Network title that's much deeper than it first appears, *Pain* is essentially a physics experiment stretched (and smashed and crushed) into game form. Aim your character's trajectory, pull back the sling, let go, then provide careful aftertouch to get maximum bonuses. Big on play modes, this.



Ratchet And Clank Future

FORMAT: **PS3** PUBLISHER: **SCE**
DEVELOPER: **INSOMNIAC** RELEASE: **NOVEMBER**

You have to wonder when Insomniac's weapon designers will run out of steam. Perhaps the key is to simply keep pushing the boundaries: here, you can use one weapon to turn your enemies into penguins, and then make them dance to a disco groove with another. One of the boldest-looking PS3 games at E3.



Everyday Shooter

FORMAT: **PC, PS3** PUBLISHER: **SOE**
DEVELOPER: **QUEASY GAMES** RELEASE: **TBA**

As its release nears, each look at *Everyday Shooter* simply shows it to be less and less, well, everyday. The riffs that can be achieved (each destroyed enemy emits a sound) with bombs and combinations are integrated beautifully, and the vast amount of skins and options should make this an absorbing diversion.



Gran Turismo 5 Prologue

FORMAT: **PS3** PUBLISHER: **SCE**
DEVELOPER: **POLYPHONY DIGITAL** RELEASE: **TBA**

Gran Turismo 5 is still scheduled for release in 2008, but the suffix is for the downloadable demo that will be available towards the end of 2007 for PSN users, featuring online multiplayer. Polyphony's trailer looked stunning, and as far as fan teasers go it's up there with the *Halo 3* beta. But who's complaining?



Infamous

FORMAT: **PS3** PUBLISHER: **SCE**
DEVELOPER: **SUCKER PUNCH** RELEASE: **2008**

There wasn't much to see of this game, from the team behind the super-polished *Sly Cooper* series and *Rocket: Robot On Wheels*, but the trailer sketched out a *Crackdown*-style adventure with a much darker edge than any of Sucker Punch's previous titles. Multiple use of art assets suggest it's a long way off.



Pixeljunk Racers

FORMAT: **PS3** PUBLISHER: **SOE**
DEVELOPER: **Q GAMES** RELEASE: **AUGUST**

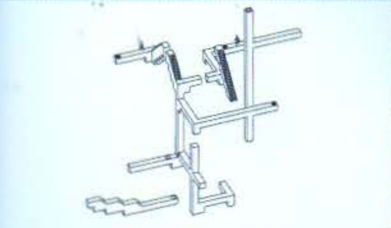
Having previously delivered *StarFox Command* on DS for Nintendo, Japan's Q Games, co-founded by ex-Argonaut man Dylan Cuthbert, debuted this, its first non-handheld project, at E3. Think Race 'N' Chase (rather than *Super Sprint*, which is the impression it gives in screenshots), but with more than two players.



Haze

FORMAT: **PS3, 360** PUBLISHER: **UBISOFT**
DEVELOPER: **FREE RADICAL** RELEASE: **NOVEMBER (PS3)**

There were few developers at E3 with richer track records in firstperson shooter production than Free Radical, and *Haze* once more proved to be supremely solid, with a selection of innovations that in other hands might manifest themselves as mere gimmicks. The vehicle-based sections should prove interesting.



Echochrome

FORMAT: **PS3, PSP** PUBLISHER: **SCE**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE** RELEASE: **TBA**

One of the games Phil Harrison seemed most proud of during Sony's press conference (saying it had "possibly the least graphics and most gameplay of any title you are going to see this week"), *Echochrome* takes as its inspiration the work of MC Escher. Needs to be seen in motion.



Warhawk

FORMAT: **PS3** PUBLISHER: **SCE**
DEVELOPER: **INCOGNITO** RELEASE: **AUGUST**

Limited beta tests have proven Incognito's game to be a durable multiplayer combat extravaganza, but only the stress tests of paying consumers will decide if *Warhawk* will mark the beginning of a new era for PlayStation 3 online gaming. Even if the game isn't a massive success, expect SCE to support with updates.



Killzone 2

FORMAT: **PS3** PUBLISHER: **SCE**
DEVELOPER: **GUERRILLA GAMES** RELEASE: **2008**

The demo level of *Killzone 2* at E3 was filled with so many carefully constructed lighting, shadow and other environmental effects that picking through its many layers became difficult. Certainly there was a subtlety to some of the technology that was lost on many. Mission accomplished, though? Not quite yet.



Metal Gear Solid 4

FORMAT: **PS3** PUBLISHER: **KONAMI**
DEVELOPER: **KOJIMA STUDIOS** RELEASE: **Q1 2008**

Apparently Hideo Kojima will soon be showing what *Metal Gear Solid 4* is like to actually play, which will surely come as relief to his animation staff, who had to assemble another heavily choreographed trailer for E3. If the game features as much leaping around as the promo reel, it could be one tricky customer.

The Barker Hanger was a much more inviting place on the inside, though it offered meagre opportunities for the very biggest publishers to show off the extent of their line-ups







Microsoft, Nintendo and Sony took pride of place near the Barker Hangar entrance. Staff manning demo pods may have feared a rush of interest, but visitors failed to arrive in great numbers

greet any presentation over the course of E3.

This wasn't the bombastic SCE of previous events, and Tretton's closing remarks, thanking those in attendance for their continued support of the PlayStation brand, had an element of humility about them. Yes, E3 really has changed.

And so the big three press conferences ended and the Media & Business Summit could properly begin, the 3,000 attendees spreading their attentions across Santa Monica hotels and the Santa Monica Airport's Barker Hangar, transformed into something resembling a smaller version of one of the previous E3's massive conference halls (not that you'd know it from its shed-like exterior). Inside, over an area something like the size of a football pitch, the industry's biggest players, along with a handful of the smaller fries, paid heed to the obvious restrictions by showing only a handful of games each – not so much of a problem for the D3 Publishers of this world, but a headache for the likes of EA, SCE and Microsoft, which had to be selective about which games to make the most noise about, even with their larger areas.

If the videogame industry were to be judged on the strength of the showing at the diminutive and unglamorous Barker Hangar, it would look like a tin-pot enterprise whose star has faded

But all of these games were being shown elsewhere via appointments in hotels, and the Barker Hanger exhibition was only really a part of E3 2007 for the purpose of giving the videogame industry a shop window for the benefit of the mainstream media, which brought along its requisite camera crews and naive but willing reporters. And here's the problem: if the videogame industry of 2007 were to be judged on the strength of the showing at the diminutive and unglamorous Barker Hangar, it would look like a tin-pot enterprise whose star has faded; an industry, perhaps, built on those things that all those people always said were just another fad.

It's clear that E3 in its previous bloated, over-expensive guise had become untenable, but few having had to run the gauntlet of its replacement would argue that 2007's proposal was the ideal solution. Next year expect another offering to appear, earlier in the calendar, and possibly in an entirely new location. Las Vegas would make a change – and it already has glitz to spare.



WEBSITE OF THE MONTH

For those that find the disjoint between *World Of Warcraft* and the corporeal world threatening to domestic relationships, Chore Wars could offer a partial solution. Adding new synergy between the pleasures of grinding and household responsibility, Chore Wars allows you to go on quests and earn your character XP by simply taking the bins out or washing the toilet. Members of a household form a party and create 'Adventures' – chores assigned with XP rewards and chances of meeting monsters and treasure – that once party members have carried out in real life, they can embark on in-game. The race to level up, and clean up, is on.

Site:
Chore Wars
URL:
www.chorewars.com





The poor attendee turnout at the Barker Hangar at least made it easy to spend hands-on time with games – not that the same titles weren't available for private viewing in Santa Monica's more inviting hotel suites



Assassin's Creed

FORMAT: **360, PC, PS3** PUBLISHER: **UBISOFT**
DEVELOPER: **UBISOFT MONTREAL** RELEASE: **NOVEMBER**

The PS3 version was available to play for the first time at E3, and we spent a good while vaulting around Jerusalem's rooftops in order to get a feel for how *Assassin's Creed* actually plays. The surprise? That the parkour element is so easy to pull off. Not a surprise? That the combat isn't nearly as easy.



Call Of Duty 4: Modern Warfare

FORMAT: **360, PC, PS3** PUBLISHER: **ACTIVISION**
DEVELOPER: **INFINITY WARD** RELEASE: **OCTOBER**

Though this is the first in the series not set in WWII, hallmarks of the franchise remain; the game's action is divided among multiple protagonists and arenas of war. The most recent footage shows off often near-photorealistic visuals, and ever more fluid mechanics, such as the intuitive use of SAS stealth techniques.



Devil May Cry 4

FORMAT: **360, PC, PS3** PUBLISHER: **CAPCOM**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE** RELEASE: **Q4**

Capcom offered only a short demo during E3, but it was enough to prove that swordplay and gunshots are as stylishly implemented here as before, and that the game features some of the most evocative background details yet seen on PS3 (not that you can interact with most of them). One to watch, for sure.



Guitar Hero 3: Legends Of Rock

FORMAT: **360, PS2, PS3, WII** PUBLISHER: **ACTIVISION**
DEVELOPER: **NEVERSOFT** RELEASE: **OCTOBER**

After confirmation that Slash will make an appearance as the last boss, and the impressive new stylings of the peripheral, *Guitar Hero 3* is gathering some momentum despite being overshadowed by *Rock Band*. The battle mode and impressive tracklisting should make this a gnarly alternative.



Blacksite: Area 51

FORMAT: **360, PC, PS3** PUBLISHER: **MIDWAY**
DEVELOPER: **MIDWAY AUSTIN** RELEASE: **OCTOBER**

The variety of *Blacksite*'s levels was on show at E3 in a seamless sequence that switched between various ways of engaging with the alien enemy. A demo is currently available on Xbox Marketplace, and the inclusion of a 'Humans vs Reborn' multiplayer mode suggests some interesting online possibilities.



Condemned 2: Bloodshot

FORMAT: **360, PS3** PUBLISHER: **SEGA**
DEVELOPER: **MONOLITH** RELEASE: **Q1 2008**

The most violent game of the show? Monolith's shocker sequel probably pipped it, thanks to the ways in which you can dispatch enemies (kicking to the groin first, perhaps, before breaking arms and stoving in heads). A greatly enhanced forensic-tests element goes some way towards easing off of the pedal.



John Woo Presents Stranglehold

FORMAT: **360, PC, PS3** PUBLISHER: **MIDWAY**
DEVELOPER: **MIDWAY CHICAGO** RELEASE: **SEPTEMBER**

You know that a game is keen to show off its use of physics when there are just a little *too* many items of fruit conveniently lying about the place. It may not be subtle, then, but *Stranglehold* seems to hold up where it matters, with exaggerated gunplay tied to leaps and dives that feel just about authentic.



TimeShift

FORMAT: **360, PC, PS3** PUBLISHER: **VIVENDI**
DEVELOPER: **SABER INTERACTIVE** RELEASE: **OCTOBER**

We still can't work out if the time-travel element is going to be truly convincing, but *TimeShift* has been completely overhauled since its first appearance in these pages, and it is now one slick-looking game (powered not by Unreal but its own 3D tech). Side note: second best rain effects of any game at E3.



Unreal Tournament III

FORMAT: **360, PC, PS3** PUBLISHER: **MIDWAY**
DEVELOPER: **EPIC** RELEASE: **NOVEMBER (PC, PS3)**

Among the most interesting innovations in this third *Tournament* proper – quite apart from the fact that it will ship with what Epic claims is a fully fledged singleplayer mode – is that the PS3 version will be compatible with PC mods, which you'll be able to 'simply' pass over to the console. Intriguing.



Civilization Revolution

FORMAT: **360, DS, PC, PS3, WII** PUBLISHER: **2K GAMES**
DEVELOPER: **FIRAXIS** RELEASE: **2008**

If one graphical effect was ubiquitous among the better-looking games at E3, it was depth of field, with even this console-focused, user-friendlier reworking of the classic *Civilization* template utilising it. As you'd expect from Firaxis, this is built with some finesse, with some great multiplayer options.



Resident Evil 5

FORMAT: **360, PS3** PUBLISHER: **CAPCOM**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE** RELEASE: **TBA**

One more precious detail about *Resi 5*'s environment: your eyes will take time to adjust to light and dark conditions. The lead has been confirmed as Chris Redfield, enemies are possessed humans, and events are set ten years after the original. Bad news? The game could be out any time between 2008 and 2010.



The Club

FORMAT: **360, PC, PS3** PUBLISHER: **SEGA**
DEVELOPER: **BIZARRE CREATIONS** RELEASE: **Q3 2007**

Bizarre's shooter is rushing towards completion, with promises of 16-player online battles over nine multiplayer modes whetting the appetite. A runthrough showed doors splintering, foes being shot through walls and a combo meter which, if you can keep running, takes your score into the stratosphere.



Super Mario Galaxy

FORMAT: **WII** PUBLISHER: **NINTENDO**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE** RELEASE: **DECEMBER**

Developed by the team previously responsible for *Donkey Konga: Jungle Beat*, at E3 *Mario Galaxy* revealed itself to be an even more wildly varied experience than we'd previously imagined, twisting and turning through 3D space, and then twisting some more. Another game of the show contender.



Mario Kart Wii

FORMAT: **WII** PUBLISHER: **NINTENDO**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE** RELEASE: **Q1 2008**

"This is not your father's *Mario Kart*," said Reggie, making some assumptions about the age of those in the audience at Nintendo's conference. Online play is promised (with a hint that such match-ups would involve many players), along with a battle mode, and a selection of wide, sometimes heavily inclined tracks.



Resident Evil: Umbrella Chronicles

FORMAT: **WII** PUBLISHER: **CAPCOM**
DEVELOPER: **CAPCOM** RELEASE: **TBA**

As one of two games making use of the Wii Zapper during E3 (though both can be played without, too), Capcom's game suffered at the hands of Sega's *Ghost Squad*, whose arcade origins made it more accessible. It may have been calibration, but we had aiming issues, too. We'll have a proper preview soon.



Zack And Wiki

FORMAT: **WII** PUBLISHER: **CAPCOM**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE** RELEASE: **OCTOBER**

The demo at E3 was such a comprehensive showing of this impressive puzzler it left many making hasty claims for its pre-eminence among the titles on show: proof of an appeal beyond its cartoon visuals. The use of the Remote is handled with some skill, making this an unexpected but definite highlight of E3.

SOUND BYTES

"I was in the ER at St John's Medical Center. I think I got some E3 on me and I've gotten very sick for the last couple of days. I had to be rushed to the hospital in the night after shaking in my bed for hours for the second day in a row"
GameCock's **Mike Wilson** explains why he's leading a funeral procession dressed in a hospital gown

"The reason I have them on is that my soul is just so blisteringly fast that if I didn't keep them tied down somehow, it might impregnate women"
Freddy Wong, *Guitar Hero II* winner in the Dallas World Series of Video Games, talks to the Seattle Post-Intelligencer about the chains around his neck

"Like making love to a rubber doll"
Guitar student **Ben Azar** describes the specific nuances of *Guitar Hero* to the New York Times

"We're certainly thinking about making it American size. We may need to supersize it. We've been focus-testing Reggie!"
Shigeru Miyamoto gets practical about the Wii Balance Board, with no fear of being fired

"It's something that is going to be a slow burner, and suddenly it's like a tsunami"
SCEE's **David Reeves** gets out his metaphor mixer in explaining how PlayStation 3 will ultimately win the console war

"Magikoopa magic! Turn the train spastic!"
Why **Nintendo** has withdrawn *Mario Party 8* from UK shop shelves





INTERVIEW

Overseer of oversteer

Sega is on track to bring its most successful arcade game back in an exhilarating new form

Joyously recreating the vibrancy and accessibility of its predecessors, the new *Sega Rally* simultaneously attempts to bring a few big innovations to the world of the arcade racer. Aside from the expected graphical leaps, *Sega Rally*'s surface deformation technology affects traction hugely – meaning you create your own racing line for subsequent laps, changing gameplay as the track is churned up. **Guy Wilday** (above), director of Sega's Nottingham-based racing studio, talks about how the team set about bringing a much-loved series back to life.

You're dealing with a series that's associated with fond memories – how true do you think you are being to *Sega Rally* as fans will know it, and how do you think you've pushed the franchise?
We've tried very hard to be true to the original game. We've played it a lot and have a awful lot of respect for *Sega Rally*. We love the way it plays. I think we very much tried to capture what we believed to be the essence of that game – we're trying to do something new and innovative whilst still retaining the feeling of that title. That's been our challenge, really. The feedback we've had has been enormously positive.

"We've tried very hard to be true to the original game. We've played it a lot and have a awful lot of respect for Sega Rally. We love the way it plays"

How would you describe your position within the racing game market?
I'll be honest with you, I think people are done with simulations now, I think people are tired of them. We've had that realism for what feels like forever, and want something a bit new in a racing experience – and that's really what we've tried to do here. We've tried to provide something that both looks different and hopefully plays differently – something that manages to be really accessible whilst delivering some new features too.

***Colin McRae: DIRT* has adopted a more arcade feel than in previous games – do titles like this and *MotorStorm* eat into *Sega Rally*'s market?**
I certainly feel that, if you look at *DIRT* for example, it's still quite gritty, it's very realistic – I think I'd position *Sega Rally* as quite different from both *DIRT* and *MotorStorm*. The look and feel of this game is in essence a Sega game. It's got a very bright, vibrant look and feel. But at the same time I think we've tried to innovate, we've done something new with the surface deformation technology, it's been something we've focused on for gameplay reasons more than just for visual reasons. And I must admit that now playing games without it feels like there's something missing – you get so used to driving in this game and having all that behaviour that I'm very optimistic this is going to set a new benchmark.



The track's uneven surface is expressed well through the 360's rumble-enabled controller, but the game gains new levels of intensity when played using a force-feedback steering wheel

***Sega Rally* has this interesting balance of graphical fidelity and almost over-the-top**

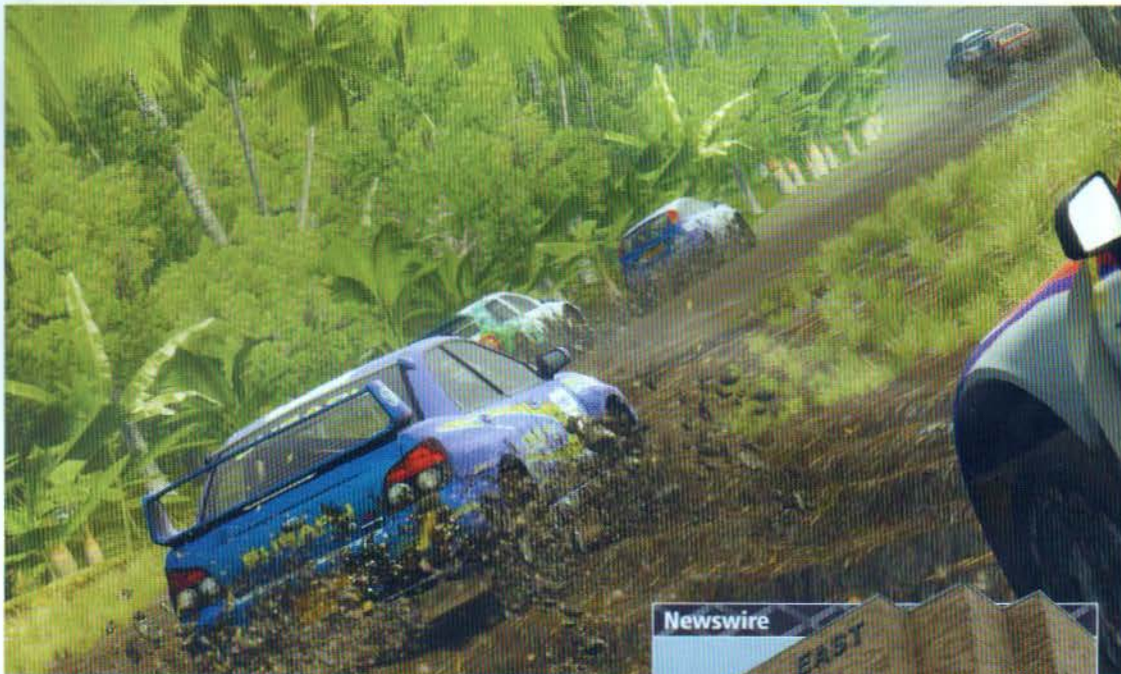












Aside from the surface deformation technology, *Sega Rally* does some neat tricks with particles, building up snow and mud – but these kind of graphical touches are secondary to solid gameplay



styling. How did you go about establishing the game's art direction?
It was extremely difficult, to be honest. Knowing what we've been through to get to where we are now, I'd say it's much easier to create something that's realistic because there's so much reference. If you need to get a tree looking real, you can just go outside. If you want to create a Sega tree it's stylised, it's something that's unique. You've got to pick a design that holds your game together. That's been tricky. I'm really pleased with what we've achieved, but it's been challenging.

Is there a similar process of balancing that goes into refining the realism?
Absolutely. The first thing we did with our physics engine was try and get it as realistic as possible. Realistic generally means that it's difficult to handle. So what we've done is tune it so it's accessible, so that people can jump in and very quickly be enjoying it and compete against other people.

You've opted to make use of a very limited car damage model. What was the reasoning behind this?
Again, for me it's about how this particular game works – it's not a realistic rally sim, so it's not about damage. It's about multiplayer racing. To that extent the damage plays a much lesser part in this game than it would in another rally title. There aren't big, lavish accidents; you don't incur performance damage on your car; the damage is fairly superficial. So you'll get scratches along the side of your car, but it's all minor. The focus is on racing through these environments.

Where do see the racing genre going in the next few years, and how has that affected *Sega Rally*'s development?
Traditionally, you've always had your arcade racing games and your hardcore simulation games. I think it'll be very interesting to see how the market moves forward. I think the market is definitely changing. It's changing based on people's gaming habits more than anything. In my experience, and that of our market research, people are playing games for shorter periods, so they're after games that they can dip in and out of more easily – they're looking for more instantaneous gratification, really, and more instantaneous reward. That does influence the design of your games.

At one time, players were after enormous depth and complexity, and I'm not sure they're after that any more – they want a different type of gaming experience. I hope that's what we've recognised and what we are moving towards. I'd like to think *Sega Rally* is where the market's going to go.

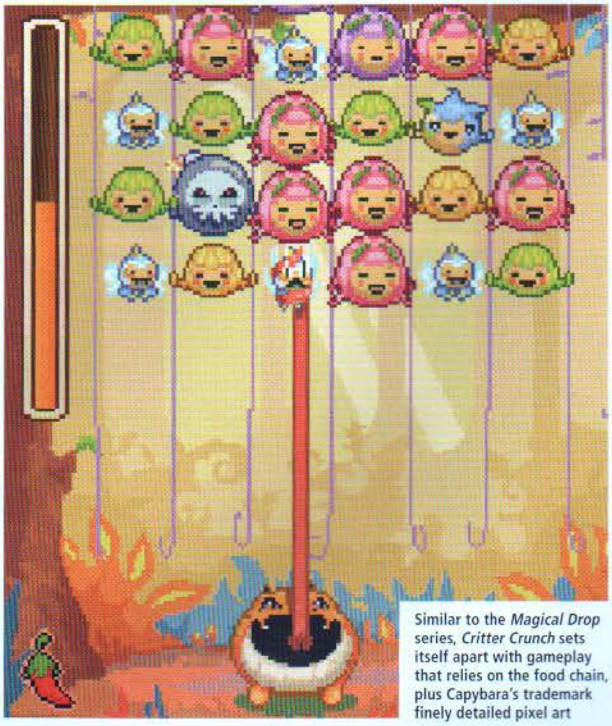
Newswire



Warren commission

Less than a year after its acquisition of the UK's Climax Racing studio (subsequently renamed Black Rock Studio), Disney Interactive has announced its acquisition of Junction Point, the Austin-based developer founded by *Deus Ex* creator Warren Spector. The move, whereby Junction Point will work on both new and existing Disney properties, isn't quite as surprising as initial thoughts suggest: Spector's early love of cartoons led to 1984's Toon, a referential pen-and-paper RPG published by Steve Jackson Games. Graham Hopper, Disney Interactive's executive vice president, said: "Warren Spector's unique talents as a leading creative force in the world of videogames, his knowledge and passion for Disney and his legacy of storytelling and character development adds a unique creative dimension to our portfolio."





Similar to the *Magical Drop* series, *Critter Crunch* sets itself apart with gameplay that relies on the food chain, plus Capybara's trademark finely detailed pixel art



Upward mobility

Perceptions of the mobile market are slowly changing; here's one company helping to make it a good-looking transformation

Capybara Games is a small mobile game studio that creates titles with distinct, finely detailed pixel artwork in a market drowning in licences and retro remakes. Recently managing to reach operator top ten lists with original girl-on-girl brawler *Pillowfight* (published by I-play), the Toronto-based company is keen to talk about the challenges today's independent mobile developers face. President **Tom Frencel** and creative director **Kris Pitrowski** are in the interviewees' chairs.

What are your most recent titles to make it to market?

Tom Frencel: The last one was *Pirates Of The Caribbean: At World's End*, but our next original title to reach market will be *Critter Crunch* through Disney and Starwave. A puzzler based on feeding creatures to other creatures, it doesn't rely on a match-three mechanic – unlike most other mobile puzzlers.

> **"The purchasing experience is at least starting to get better, but consumers need to be made more aware of their phones' capabilities. People need to see how cool games can be on mobile"**

Why do you think there are so few original titles on mobile phones?

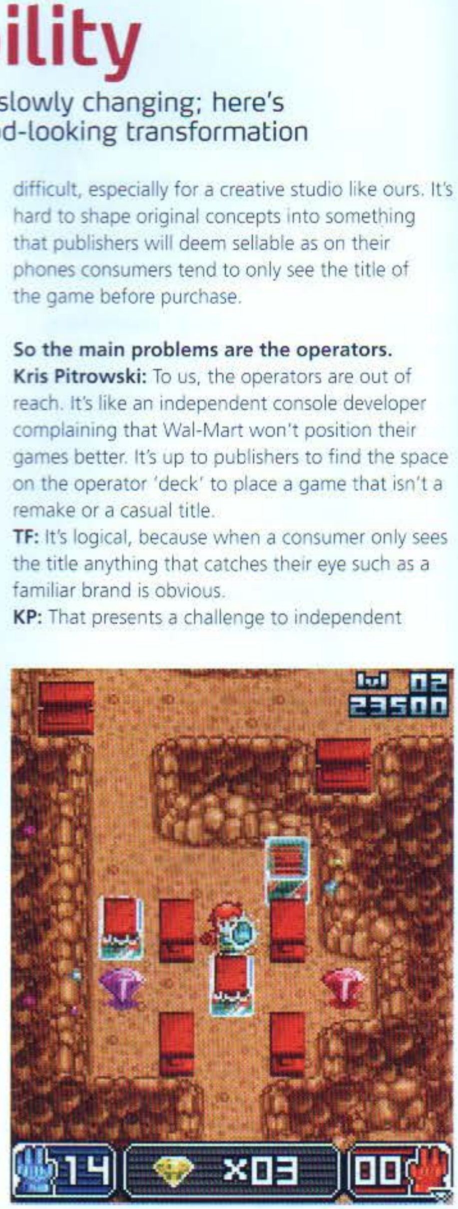
TF: The biggest challenge is the distribution channels. There are very few publishers that have the worldwide presence to push original titles. It's challenging to sell your title to a publisher, then to have them sell your title to all of the operators across the world, to then sell to consumers. Typically, the games that are popular on mobile are casual or retro titles – *Bejeweled*, *Tetris* – and it's the publishers who own licences that make the majority of the money. For an independent it's difficult, especially for a creative studio like ours. It's hard to shape original concepts into something that publishers will deem sellable as on their phones consumers tend to only see the title of the game before purchase.

So the main problems are the operators.

Kris Pitrowski: To us, the operators are out of reach. It's like an independent console developer complaining that Wal-Mart won't position their games better. It's up to publishers to find the space on the operator 'deck' to place a game that isn't a remake or a casual title.

TF: It's logical, because when a consumer only sees the title anything that catches their eye such as a familiar brand is obvious.

KP: That presents a challenge to independent



Despite being based on the otherwise tired block-pushing mechanic, *Super Shove It!* ups the ante by featuring three different kinds of blocks interacted with in different ways

OUT THERE



BAPTISED IN BLOOD

Full Spectrum Warrior scraped through on its ethical 'sensitivity', *America's Army* on its 'honesty' as a military recruitment tool. *Gears Of War*, however, might have its work cut out. One of the latest games to appear at an official US Army event, namely July's Army Gaming Championships, Epic's chainsaws-and-intestines shooter proved a controversial primer for tomorrow's real-world peacekeepers. The game's Mature rating didn't help, though event organisers maintained that no one under 17 years old was admitted. Still, the mind boggles as to how 'kill 100 enemies' achievements and the Hammer of Dawn are going to one day benefit the people of Afghanistan and Iraq. Other games to appear included *Command & Conquer 3*, *Resistance: Fall Of Man* and *Call Of Duty 3*.









More than just a quirky one-on-one brawler, *Pillowfight* has a career mode, with tournaments and unlockables such as – oh, yes – new pillows. *Monkey On Your Back* (right), meanwhile, recalls *MegaMan*

developers because there's no way to acquire brands. All you can hope for is to work on them and receive at least some royalties so you can work on original titles which will have better royalties, but will compete against these very brands.

TF: However great your game might be, when all a consumer sees is the title they may never buy it.

Ultimately, then, quality isn't a key factor at all in terms of what sells.

TF: It really isn't.

What do you think needs to be done to change consumer habits?

TF: The purchasing experience is at least starting to get better. As network speeds get faster, downloads and browsing becomes more convenient. You won't have to just look at a title, you'll be able to see a screenshot or download a trial version. Consumers need to be made more aware of their phones' capabilities and the quality of available games. People need to see how cool games can be on mobile.

What's next for Capybara?

TF: We're looking to go multiformat. We love mobile and we're going to continue working in mobile games, but our creative needs may need to be met on the bigger platforms – Nintendo DS, Xbox Live Arcade. Original IP on mobile is a tough sell, but it's something that other formats are starved of.



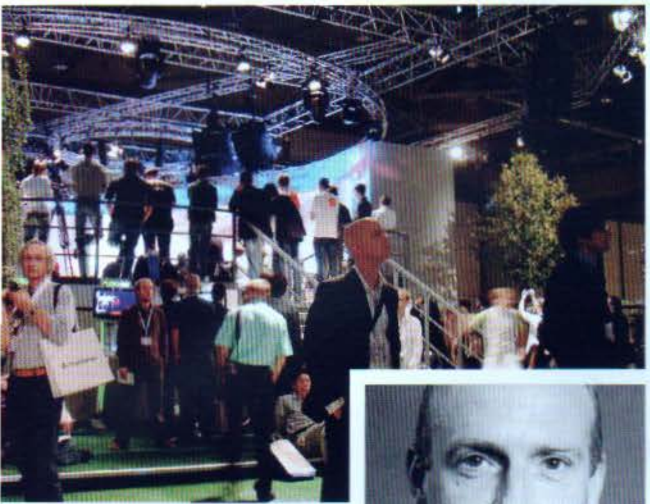
Puzzle Hero

Bringing big games to small phones

Capybara is also hard at work on *Puzzle Hero*, its most ambitious game to date. "Gamers often don't expect too much depth from mobile games, but we're really trying to change that with *Puzzle Hero*," says Pitrowski. "We've set out to push the limits; A gorgeous world to explore, an engaging storyline with great characters and awesome boss battles – all fuelled by a puzzle-battling mechanic called Battle Blocks. We're really hoping that this game will turn sceptical hardcore gamers on to mobile games."







GC has room for eight-foot-tall Sonic models as well as presentations about the larger movement towards casual gaming and gaming's place in society at large. More details: www.gc-germany.com



EVENT

Leipzig expands as E3 cuts back

GAMES CONVENTION

Can the German game expo bring in the crowds and continue its growth?



The Games Convention is one of the best attended events in the videogame industry (186,000 visitors in 2006), and this year takes place from August 23-26 in Leipzig, Germany. As well as this, there are plans to expand the show into Singapore and beyond. We spoke to event organiser **Klaus Ernst** (left) about the future.

What are the key differences between this year's GC and last year's?

There are a few things. There are 400 exhibitors this year, with many more international exhibitors; a new hall concept, which is largely down to the increase in the business to business section by about 20 per cent; and new opening hours, extended until eight in the evening.

"We have a lot of consumers from the ages of 16 to 25 and we want them to enjoy it – there's a campsite with concerts and a sports area. It's halfway between a fairground and a city"

And attendees can also camp there this year?

That's because we have a lot of consumers from the ages of 16 to 25 that like to come to Leipzig and we want them to enjoy it – there's a campsite with concerts, a swimming pool and a sports area. It's kind of halfway between a fairground and a city. It's a festival, sure, but conscious of the fact it's in a city centre, and also a bit of a trade fair.

What impact has the downsizing of E3 had?

We are getting more attention, though we already had a lot of major players worldwide attending. The bookings and registrations tell us that we will have more guests, on a simple level, but the big difference was in developers from some specific areas of Europe that used to go to E3 – they are now focused on Leipzig and don't go to America [for E3] any more.

Do you think GC will become the one key event in the industry calendar?

It's a fallacy that in the business there is only room for one big worldwide name – there are too many separate markets and separate demands, customer structures and the like. Look at the car industry – there's the Detroit Motor Show, events in Frankfurt, Geneva, Tokyo, Moscow, shows all over the world. The same will happen in the games industry. Perhaps the question is more how you define big – what's the structure behind it? In the future there will be big events everywhere. But I think you always have an international aspect towards presentations and a national or regional aspect. Every time a show gets too big they end up being too international and have no context for their own userbase – we have seen this in other industries. They say 'go, go, go!' and then get smaller and smaller and have to start over. I think the same will happen in our industry.

How can you encourage more Brits to make the journey to Leipzig?

We try to do different things and support them with help with, for example, booking hotels. GC really does have that younger market of people who want to come here and be gamers, but still have a good time when our doors close in the evening.

OUT THERE

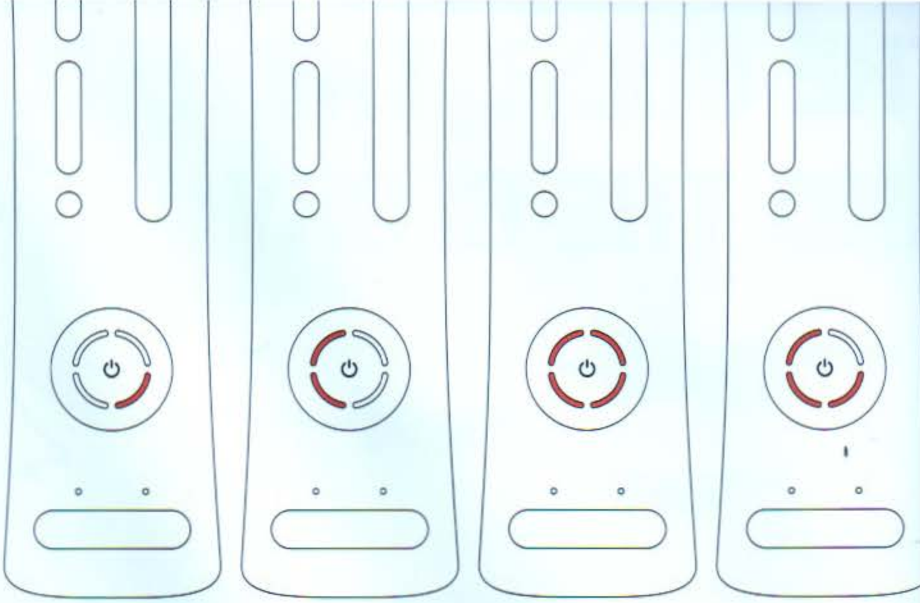


GRINDING FOR THE MAN

Risking accusations of putting the cart before the horse, Korea's National Tax Service this month began taxing the real-world sale of virtual items, despite uncertainty over the very legality of the practice itself. No more will games such as *Second Life* and *Lineage* represent tax havens for the country's RMT (real money trading) entrepreneurs, many of which have already agreed to share details of their client transactions with authorities. The new policy, effective from July 1, decrees that sellers who make between six and 12 million won (£3,200 – £6,400) per half year will have VAT auto-applied. Additionally, sellers who earn more than 12 million won per half year will need 'a business licence and will pay the tax by themselves'.



The Xbox 360's problems (see E178) stem from overheating, but Microsoft and thirdparty repair outlets differ in their reasoning for the source of the problem



HARDWARE

Playing it cool

As temperatures drop within the latest 360s, the fail-rate issue hits boiling point

As Xbox 360 reliability issues continue their growth to panicky proportions, Microsoft has finally made its first big step to rectifying the problem with the announcement of a three-year warranty for both old and new machines, effective from the date of purchase. Answering the controversy over previous shipping and labour charges, the new service is entirely free, though not as transparent as many would prefer.

The precise cause of the 'red ring of death' remains contentious, the official hotline recently blaming household surge protectors for 90 per cent of failures within one six-month period. Such refusal to accept 360's systemic flaws has done little to restore confidence among fans waiting patiently for units they've sent for repair. Anecdotal evidence places the number of defective units at a third of those sold. Microsoft's estimates for the cost of its new warranty, based on expected return rates, repair costs per unit and the resale potential of defective units, currently sits between $1.05bn and $1.15bn.

Fears over the future stability of 360 hardware have, at least, been allayed by reports of Microsoft's new 65nm chipset, codenamed Falcon. The drop from 90nm chips, which include core components such as CPU, GPU and video processor, should increase airflow and reduce heat within future machines, also halving the cost of th manufacturing process. Hardware specifics and shipping dates have yet to be announced officially – they may never be – but Microsoft's anticipation of profit for the fiscal year 2008 hints at Falcon's arrival within 2007.

E3 SPECIAL

Continue

American game devs
Thank you for all your kind words about Edge

Wii Fit
Nintendo continues to smash down barriers

Sushi Roku
Home to the *Killzone 2* reveal and tasty fish

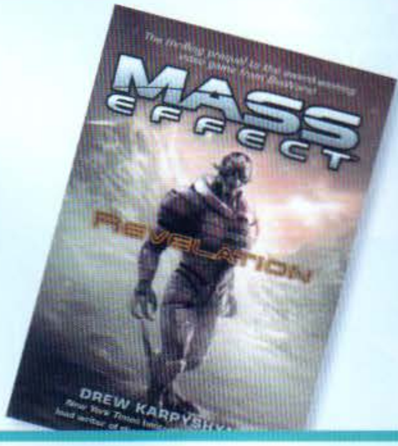
Quit

The Saddle Ranch
Still the stinkiest bar on Sunset Strip

Wii Fit
We actually *ached* the following morning

American cab drivers
"You know where we're going? Oh, you don't"

Author: Drew Karpyshyn
Publisher: Orbit
ISBN: 978 1 84149 675 7



MASS EFFECT: REVELATION

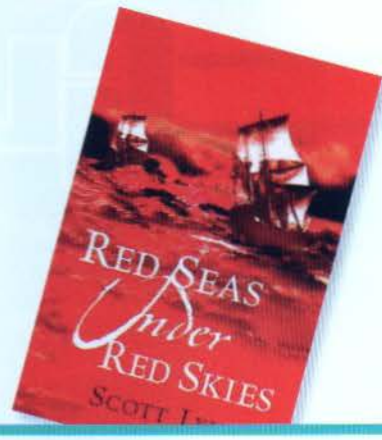
BioWare designer branches out into fiction in support of forthcoming Xbox 360 game

The whole game-book tie-in is now a well-worn path. Over the years, we've had a side-story for *Splinter Cell*'s Sam Fisher, not to mention a few *Halo* and *World Of WarCraft*-based literary exploits. Heck, UK developer Rebellion even runs its own Abbadon imprint. Where Mass Effect: Revelation is different is that, in this case, the book comes before the game's release. In addition, the author happens to work as a designer for developer BioWare, so there should be no excuse for inaccuracy.

That noted, however, there appears to be little direct crossover between the two forms. The game's protagonist Commander Shepard doesn't feature, and much of the book has the feel of being an introductory primer to the various races and back-history BioWare has created in the process of coming up with *Mass Effect*. These include the aggressive, reptilian Krogan, the bird-like Turians and the wily Salarians. Various technologies such as faster-than-light mass relays also come up.

As for plot, it has more depth than a typical gung-ho shoot 'em up, but not a lot. An illegal Alliance research centre has been destroyed in a merc raid, with one scientist vanishing just beforehand. Her whereabouts become a race between three interested parties: the hero, the mercs, plus one of the controlling council's Spectre enforcement agents, Saren, who will indeed feature heavily in the game. Still, this is probably only for those who already have the game preordered.

Author: Scott Lynch
Publisher: Gollancz
ISBN: 978 0 575 07695 2



RED SEAS UNDER RED SKIES

Professional conman Locke Lamora takes to sea in the second book of this anticipated fantasy series

Since he burst on to the scene with last year's The Lies Of Locke Lamora, the release of another of Scott Lynch's proposed seven-strong Gentleme Bastard series has become something of a fantasy event. Part of the reason was the sheer joy gained by the twisted yet polished adventure master thieves Locke Lamora and his sidekick Jean Tannen. But there wa interest in whether Lynch could continue such high standards over a prolonged period. Certainly Red Seas Under Red Skies demonstrates the pressure that comes with success. It doesn't have the debut's flow and the ending is definitely rushed. Despite its 650 pages, it could easily do with another 100-odd. Nevertheless, it also suggests the author has plenty of ambition remaining, as well as places he wants to take Lamora and Tannen. The battleground this time is the city state of Tal Varrar where there are plenty of nobles to relieve of their riches. As always, Lamora has higher goals, which eventually results in a convoluted triple sting to steal from the owner of the city's casino and stir up a pirate insurrection, as well as take down one of the city elders. It's the pirates that form the major part of the book though, as our landlubbing heroes get to grips with Zamira Drakasha, the notorious captain of the Poisone Orchid. One of the most rounded characters so far, it's said she'll feature in one of three backstory novellas next year; about the same time the Gentlemen Bastards are due to return in The Republic.

INCOMING

New games, and updates on games already on the radar

Quake Wars: Enemy Territory

FORMAT: 360, PC, PS3 **PUBLISHER:** ACTIVISION



If the long-awaited beta is any sign, the pieces of *Quake Wars* are better than the whole, as *Battlefield 2142* was. We always knew Splash Damage had plenty of surprises in store, just not this one

Virtua Fighter 5

FORMAT: 360 **PUBLISHER:** SEGA



A parry and reversal from Microsoft following that initial PS3 strike. Now it's 360 boasting contentious online multiplayer support, together with the coin-op's latest Version C feature set

Dynasty Warriors: Gundam

FORMAT: 360, PS3 **PUBLISHER:** NAMCO BANDAI



Before *Ace Combat 6*, *Tekken 6* and *Soul Calibur IV*, the Bandai Namco comeback trail leads to Omega Force's unlikely (though really quite inevitable) clash of *Warriors* action and Gundam steel

Fatal Inertia

FORMAT: 360, PS3 **PUBLISHER:** KOEI



Another improbable turnaround: the PS3 version stalls while the recently announced 360 game gears up for a September launch. Apparently it's just a slip, however, and not a complete write-off

Grand Theft Auto IV

FORMAT: 360, PS3 **PUBLISHER:** TAKE-TWO



Rockstar's original controversy is accelerating towards its third-generation debut, with familiar sights (see Clucking Bell, etc) but new ways of getting around that will shake up the sandbox genre

Dark Messiah: Elements

FORMAT: 360 **PUBLISHER:** UBISOFT



Hopefully Ubisoft can keep the performance issues of the early PC version away from consoles. Bringing the requirements down from 2GB of RAM to 360's 512MB will take some mean sorcery

Hail To The Chimp

FORMAT: 360, PS3 **PUBLISHER:** GAMECOCK



A party game based around politics? Where do we sign? Anyone turned off by the mere thought of minigames need not apply, but *Hail To The Chimp*'s satiric vein should win it some floating voters

Spider-Man: Friend Or Foe

FORMAT: MULTI **PUBLISHER:** ACTIVISION



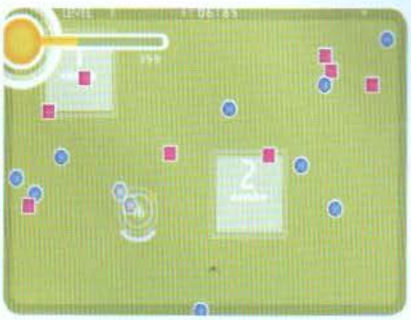
A cartoony take on the webswinger that allows you to beat up then team up with your enemies, with (at last) superhero co-op available. After *Spider-Man 3*, true believers need this one badly

Thrillville: Off The Rails

FORMAT: 360, DS, PS2, PSP, Wii **PUBLISHER:** LUCASARTS



Frontier's playground opens its doors to a wider crowd, boasting 100 story missions, 34 multiplayer minigames and new airborne 'WHOA Coasters' to bring families (and their vomit) out in force



INTERNET GAME OF THE MONTH

Sound Energy

www.game-pure.com/flash/sound_energy/

A bare-bones game of dodge-and-collect from Japanese Flash boutique Game-Pure, *Sound Energy* proves that sometimes even synaesthesia games can be a little bit too simple.

Your cursor, which cycles between blue, purple and grey with each click of the mouse, is ticking rapidly down to zero. Picking up objects of a corresponding colour gives time back to you, also filling a combo gauge and adding layers of sound to a background beat.

The *Every Extend* influence is considerable, the music shifting from one trance progression to the next, building in complexity with each level. The pared-down visuals might leave the senses a little starved, but with that comes the incentive to track down every last rhythm the game has in store.

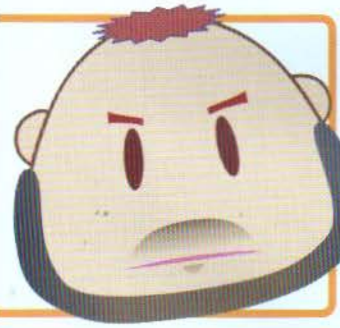
A note of warning, though: it's a demanding journey, and those with mid- to low-range systems might encounter a few energy-sapping moments of slowdown.



SOMETHING ABOUT Japan

Digit-all

Game producer Brick Bardo considers gaming's effect on movies



As most of you will know, 300 is a movie based on Frank Miller's graphic novel of the same name, depicting the Spartans' famous last stand at the Battle of Thermopylae. It doesn't just exploit the comic's style, staying true to the source material – it takes it to a new level.

And I'm stunned, not just by the movie but by the digital revolution that made it possible. To think it's only been 25 years since Tron kickstarted the phenomenon of cinema CGI. During that time, there have been plenty of milestones. I remember seeing Star Trek 2: The Wrath Of Khan for its 'Genesis sequence' in 1982, The Last Starfighter for its spaceships in 1984, The Abyss for its watery aliens in 1989, Terminator 2 for its mercury man in 1991, Jurassic Park for its dinosaurs in 1993, and Toy Story for its revolutionary, complete CG experience in 1995.

With the new millennium has come the complete integration of these effects into movies. Backgrounds are made digitally and people are placed naturally inside them. Again, we've seen a great number of milestones in a very short period of time: the Star Wars prequels, Sky Captain And The World of Tomorrow, God Diva, Sin City, A Scanner Darkly and Renaissance. And now, of course, we have 300.

Recently, I had the chance to speak with a Japanese director of photography who's based in LA. We spoke about 300, and he acknowledged a number of scenes that couldn't be explained by simply watching the movie; only by watching the making of documentary could he even begin to grasp the underlying techniques. They used three cameras, shooting the same scene from three different angles. The whole thing was then digitally mixed together afterwards. This, I realised, was the true dawn of a digital age.

The movie 300 might favour an abstract style over photorealism, but it isn't manga or pure animation either. It's realism, of course, in the sense that scenery objects and actors are real. But the editing process has shifted the entire movie's tone to somewhere between photography, art and, believe it or not, videogames. When the Spartan soldiers take on their enemies, blood flies as particle effects, spilling in the air but never on the ground. It just disappears.

Maybe CGI is being used so heavily in these circumstances to sidestep the constraints of real world physics, but then again, maybe it's also a way of enjoying the 'art' of violence without dwelling on the grisly consequences. So many guys are being cut into pieces onscreen and yet no blood remains to signify the extent of the massacre that's going on. It's hard not to see it as a reference to games, and it's about time that Hollywood started cashing in on gaming's long-standing debt to it.

It's a way of enjoying the 'art' of violence. So many guys are being cut into pieces onscreen and yet no blood remains to signify the extent of the massacre that's going on. It's hard not to see it as a reference to games

To say that games are influenced by movies is an understatement. Encouraged by the rise of PlayStation, the cinematic visual experience has become the core of innumerable games. Now, however, people used to gaming in their everyday



lives are starting to make movies. Comics, movies and games are all starting to converge thanks to the freedoms of digital technology, but really it's still the movies that hold the most influence, meaning that games can never be a step ahead. How very dull.

In the months to come, I'm sure we'll see plenty of videos and demos inspired by 300. But games are games. While I'm not against these kinds of movie-inspired games, I don't see a future in solely following their example. Beautiful demos and storytelling cutscenes are not what games should stand for. If people want to watch a movie, people will go to the movies.

Members of the public are fast making their minds up on the matter. On Nintendo's DS and Wii, they enjoy gaming not just through their eyes and ears but through their hands and body. Through networking and collective play, they also enjoy gaming as a form of communication. I get the feeling that players are searching for more than just some video to watch or buttons to push, moving their hand to perform those actions on the screen, using their brains to tackle the challenges.



Like 300, *The Darkness* (above) brings together comic, filmic and game techniques to dazzling effect. Likewise, *Transformers* (right) owes much to the current trend of multimedia convergence

Hype

The future of electronic entertainment

Edge's most wanted

LittleBigPlanet



Media Molecule's community content creation tool is infused with pure joy – but we're just as excited by the promises that it'll be a fully fledged platformer too.
PS3, SCEE

Super Mario Galaxy



Having now played more of the early levels and seen some of the later stages, we're ready to believe Miyamoto when he says that this is the true successor to *Mario 64*.
Wii, NINTENDO

Resident Evil 5



The move to Africa presents scenes of a type rarely seen in a videogame context, which may make Capcom's game even more capable of creating an impact.
360, PS3, CAPCOM

Novelty value
Can big ideas sell big units?



Forge is perhaps *Halo 3*'s ultimate expression of supporting user-generated content. Crucially, the idea is seamlessly integrated with the familiar *Halo* multiplayer experience, easing any player in to such a progressive feature

It was only in March that Sony's Phil Harrison presented his 'Game 3.0' keynote speech at GDC. There, he explained Sony's plan to join a movement, already established on the internet, that centres on users having a significant hand in creating content. He showed the world Home, *SingStar*'s upload and homepage features and, of course, *LittleBigPlanet*, each tuned to allow players to have a hand in sculpting their playing experiences.

Fast forward to E3, and Sony's firstparty games tell a different story. These games seem to express a different vision – a different generation, even. Without their Cell-afforded sheen it's possible to imagine many of them on PS2.

We have *Heavenly Sword*'s fluid thirdperson hack 'n' slash – or Girl Of War, as it has been dubbed. Jungle-based actioner *Uncharted* is known in certain circles as Bloke Raider. *Folklore*'s setting might be divergent but there's little else unfamiliar about this RPG-infused thirdperson actioner. *Lair*'s apparent struggle with its upgrade to Sixaxis motion-control might betray its *Rogue Squadron* roots. *Killzone 2* may be a more successful attempt at realising its predecessor's aspirations with intensity and spectacle, but it is most concertedly an FPS at its heart. *Eye Of Judgment* pushes at clever new technologies, but it too does not seem to have the same thirst to carve out new markets, new business models and new technologies that were extolled in Harrison's presentation.

It's therefore something of an irony that one of 2007's biggest games to carry these themes is not made by or for Sony. *Halo 3* embraces user-generated content like no other console game in history, with almost every element presenting an opportunity for its players to record, share and modify their experiences in the game.

But under these glossy features, *Halo 3* has the same, proven game design that has brought the series such system-selling success. In the same way, Sony's E3 games might seem traditional, but as upgrades of the games that sold the PS2, perhaps they will shift PlayStation 3 consoles.

New ideas take time to filter through society, of course. *Halo* and Sony might be on the right track with user-generated content, but they need to provide more traditional play, too.

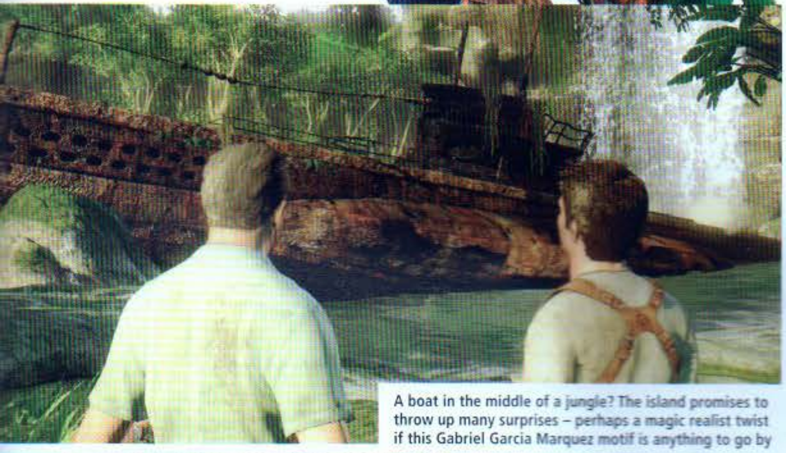




FORMAT: **PS3**
PUBLISHER: **SCEE**
DEVELOPER: **NAUGHTY DOG**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **NOVEMBER**

Uncharted: Drake's Fortune

The treasures of El Dorado beckon in this whimsical PS3-exclusive action adventure



A boat in the middle of a jungle? The island promises to throw up many surprises – perhaps a magic realist twist if this Gabriel Garcia Marquez motif is anything to go by

Uncharted: *Drake's Fortune* is one of several games that have been tasked with carrying the hopes of the PS3. With Sony CEO Jack Tretton's promise of 15 exclusive PS3 titles for the next year came the implicit admission that the console's current line-up was not especially robust. So, along with *Lair*, *Heavenly Sword* and *Folklore*, *Uncharted* will always be subject to a degree of pressure and scrutiny that most games do not have to bear. Not only will people ask whether or not *Uncharted* is worth playing, but also whether it is worth buying a PS3 in order to do so.

On the face of things, *Uncharted* doesn't seem to offer anything so radically different that the game could conceivably become a major selling point for the console. But although *Uncharted*'s derivativeness makes it less striking than some of the PS3's other upcoming titles, developer Naughty Dog has proven itself with *Jak And Daxter* to be highly competent at recycling and recombining the ideas of other games into something coherent, polished and wildly entertaining.

Mechanically and aesthetically, it's easy to draw comparisons between *Uncharted* and *Tomb Raider*. A combination of environmental puzzles and light gunplay, the game places you in the role of the charismatic Nathan Drake as he pursues the lost treasure of El Dorado. Cue much adventure and acrobatics among the dense jungles and ancient ruins of a lost island. However, it's in the character of Nathan, his companion Elena Fisher, and the narration of their exploits that the game looks like it will distinguish itself. With Nathan, Naughty Dog has an appealing creation – a character who, while witty, athletic and heroic, doesn't embody the relentless bravado of countless cookie-cutter protagonists. A lot of his char[m] is no doubt a result of *Uncharted*'s Wrinkle Mapping Facial Animation system, which enlivens the game's cutscenes and lends further spark to the spirited dialogue. (Less attention has been paid to bringing out the character of your enemies, which may be just as well, since you end up gunning down large numbers of them.)

Having followed the treasure trail to a remote island, Nathan and Elena are forced to bail out of their plane when it comes under fire. Landing separately, Nathan fight[s] off the pirates who come to scavenge the plane's wreckage using a variety of weapon[s]



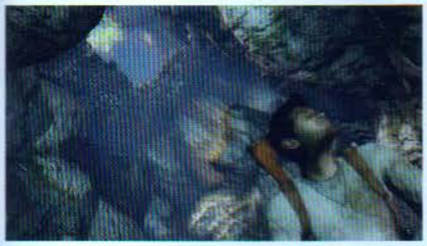
The current crop of thirdperson games have begun to nail that sense of true physical contact with the environment. *Uncharted*'s motion-captured animations are no exception







Like any number of tactical shooters, combat offers context-sensitive options, allowing Nathan to blind-fire around or over scenery







With *Far Cry* kicking off the trend of open jungle settings, *Uncharted*'s environments, though luscious, can feel a little claustrophobic in comparison to their free-roaming forebears

pistols, machine guns, shotguns and the occasional grenade (see 'Wobble bored').

At the current stage of development, the pirates seem to fall largely into one of two homogenous categories: pirates who wear yellow bandanas and pirates who wear orange bandanas – an army of villains divided into two flavours. However, while your enemies may be a largely indistinguishable swarm, the way they approach combat situations shows some sophistication – inevitably, they still all run to their deaths one after the other, but they at least spend the moments before being gunned down firing around the vine-clad ruins, covering their colleagues as they attempt a flanking manoeuvre.

The game's cheerful, hyperreal world renders combat as largely bloodless and it's an aesthetic choice that feels ever so slightly out of keeping within the reasonably tactical combat. Games that take a frivolous or sanitary approach to violence tend to dispatch enemies with gay abandon, but here your piratical adversaries are capable of absorbing a large number of bullets before they finally go down. It's a strange disconnect between the game's action and the levity displayed in the cutscenes that punctuate it.

The other mainstay of the gameplay is 3D platforming – working out how to scale the moss-covered boulders and pseudo-Incan ruins of the setting. Nathan's animation is excellent, and his actions connect believably with the environment. However, these early demonstrations suggest that the route you have to take around *Uncharted*'s environment isn't always consistently intuitive – creepers do not always offer a means of scaling walls, while some wide gaps can be leapt, cutting to a cinematic, and yet others see you plummet to your death. Given the harsh and irregular response to failure, the paths aren't always well signposted.

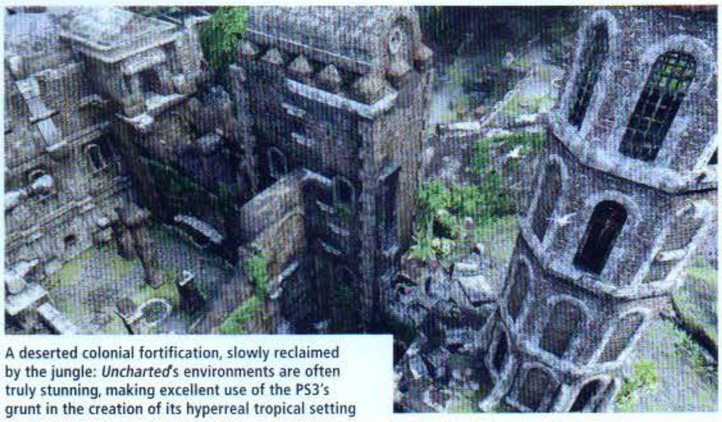
No doubt such quibbles will be a focus of the remaining development time, tweaking and massaging these elements until the challenge achieves a better balance with the title's accessibility. However, the standard of 3D action platformers has been pushed ever upwards by the likes of *Prince Of Persia* and the recent *Tomb Raider* titles – there's no doubt that Naughty Dog will have to work very hard in order to attain the same pedigree.

The environment isn't always consistent – creepers do not always offer a means of scaling walls, while some gaps can be leapt, and others see you plummet



Wobble bored

The Sixaxis' motion sensing finds its way into *Uncharted* and, as has become the trend with this feature, doesn't wholly justify its inclusion – at least, not at this stage of development. Balancing as you walk over a log is all very well, if a fairly minor gesture towards the controller's potential, but *Uncharted* also implements it as the manner in which you define the parabola of your grenades. It has yet to convince as a more efficient means of control in this particular instance, and seems like an excuse to use the feature rather than a reason to do so.



A deserted colonial fortification, slowly reclaimed by the jungle: *Uncharted*'s environments are often truly stunning, making excellent use of the PS3's grunt in the creation of its hyperreal tropical setting

FORMAT: **360, PC, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **EA (RETAIL), VALVE (PC ONLINE)**
DEVELOPER: **VALVE**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **OCTOBER 9**

The Orange Box

The first person to say the future's bright gets a crowbar in the face









Quite apart from the innovations in style and new challenges (and one of the new foes you'll be facing can be seen in the centre shot), it's noticeable how much effort Valve have put into improving *Half-Life 2* visually since its debut

In terms of convincing-sounding names that offer little indication as to actual content, *The Orange Box* is up there with the best. It can be forgiven, though, given that that content will surely be one of the bargains of 2007: the original *Half-Life 2*, accompanied by *Episode One*, plus the new *Episode Two*, plus *Team Fortress 2*, plus *Portal*.

Half-Life 2 and *Episode One* should need little introduction, the former a card-carrying member of the **Edge** hall of fame and the latter a more than respectable annex. *Episode Two* promises to be more of the same but better – a recipe that no one could object to. At a recent EA event an outdoor environment was playable featuring one of the series' new enemies, Hunters. Like smaller versions of Striders, and just about taller than a human, they are lithe, powerful and act as the shock troops for flushing out humans. They hunt in packs and are extremely adept at negotiating the environment, often establishing lookout posts on high to spot Freeman before attempting to pin you down with a crossfire of exploding shells and charging in for the kill. Their resistance to conventional weaponry meant that the gravity gun had to be used as a launcher to fling tyres at them, necessitating constant movement around for 'ammunition', yet in these open spaces they proved capable of surrounding your position in a frighteningly efficient manner.

As the Hunters make their debut, along with several new breeds of Antlion, your compatriot Alyx has also had an AI tweaking, making her more suited to tactical firefights than simple forward battling. Quite apart from the plentiful gunfighting, there will be a focus on physical puzzles in *Episode Two* beyond even the previous entries in the series, indications being that the environment and your position in it are part of a wider movement towards non-linear solutions for the various crises. This, in a sense, is an inevitable side effect of moving outside the walls of City 17 in a post-invasion world, and through a less enclosed and more organic environment. It's hardly *Half-Life* meets *Far Cry*, however, and indications are that the variation will keep the series from going stale, rather than risking a completely new direction.

The pleasure of disguising yourself as the enemy and sneaking around the back of their annoying sniper for the stealth kill is as great as it ever was

Team Fortress 2, on the other hand, barely looks to be from the same planet as its predecessor: it has a beautifully chunky look, with solid textures overlaid with bright primary colours and a visual charm that tells in every detail, from the waddling movements of the Heavy character to the swaggering taunts to follow up a kill. The original's character classes were occasionally difficult to distinguish between in the midst of a firefight, something of a problem when the game is typically more objective-based than a straightforward deathmatch, but the bright cartoon feel and exaggerated physical features of *TF2* make identifying your team members easy. There are nine classes in total with pronounced differences, so much so that the possible variations on the basic team mean that there isn't a surefire SWAT configuration of members.

Simply playing around with different abilities changes your approach to the game so profoundly that sticking with just one





Some of the more open spaces that Gordon and Alyx will travel through, and one of the new vehicles used to traverse it. *Episode Two*'s plot seems to loosely hang on trying to reach a resistance headquarters







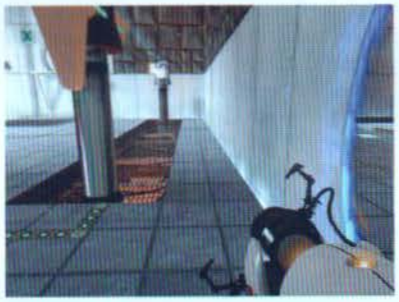
TF's Pyro character (main) has been heavily upgraded for this sequel, and if he gets within close range of any enemies they're in real trouble. Doctors (below) can heal your team during the offensive, while Engineers (left) are best suited to building defences

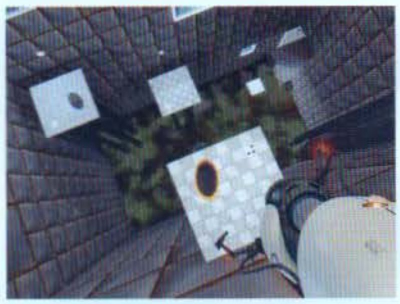


character will do the game a disservice. Engineers can establish turrets to defend valuable points on the map; Demomen can blow up anything you can get close enough to (or aim well enough at); Pyros set opponents alight up close; Medics heal you and poison the other team; Heavies destroy anything in front of them; while Scouts are as frustratingly nippy as wasps in summer. Still, there are always constants to fall back on, and the pleasure of disguising yourself as the enemy and sneaking around the back of their annoying sniper for the stealth kill is as great as it ever was – and looks much better than it ever did. *Team Fortress 2* already has a durable feel to it, and barring disasters could be become one of the essential online touchstones.

Portal, however, is very much a solo gunner and an interesting case study in itself. A quirky but solid-looking puzzler based around an FPS engine, it's easy to imagine a parallel universe where it's bombing on a solo retail release. That's no reflection on the quality of the game, but with standard titles costing £50 it's an interesting retail model for experimental games on the current generation of hardware. Demos shown thus far have shown some stunning applications of the portal weapon centred on a clever use of momentum, and the camera works quickly to reorient your view upon teleporting such that even the simple movement aesthetic is something in itself. Although a relatively short experience (two dozen missions), the applications for the portal weapon within the environments will be many and varied, ranging from sending boxes on infinite loops to dropping yourself behind the later sentry guns, while a level challenge mode is confirmed. There is a link with the ongoing *Half-Life* story, in which Gabe Newell has said that the female protagonist may have a role, but whether this is just narrative dressing on a game that doesn't need it remains to be seen. Regardless, *Portal* is the real unknown quantity of *The Orange Box*, and only extended playtime will reveal how deep the rabbit hole goes.

The Orange Box: it's a thumping title, and the recurring word around all of the contents seems to be solidity. *Half-Life 2* needs no hype, while *Portal* could offer a visual experience unlike any previous puzzle game, and *Team Fortress 2* may just end up as the online deathmatch of choice for cross-platform FPS play. Perhaps just saying solid is unfair. Perhaps, given the competition and the sheer value for money on offer, it should be more like spectacular.







Mr Kipling's science lab

Aperture Science, the sinister company in the background of *Portal*, has a highly recommended web presence (www.aperturescience.com) – a site that pretends to be an in-game terminal. Various logins and script commands can easily be found online and render up various storyline nuggets, including the presence of 'relaxation vaults', which are plastic prison cubes. The humorous and bizarre questionnaire, combined with the amoral and sinister voicework of the trailer ('If at first you don't succeed, you fail, and the test will be terminated') show there is obviously a dark subtext of pain and endurance behind *Portal*'s trip-happy teleporting. However, there's no obvious reason for the game's fascination with cake – mathematical questions about slicing it, passwords that use it and even threats that the main character could end up baked in one. Exceedingly strange.



Some of the applications of the portal gun can be pleasingly mind-boggling (above) but *Portal* eases you in, with the first levels signposting an initially simple spatial logic

FORMAT: **360, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **CODEMASTERS**
DEVELOPER: **MERCURY STEAM**
ORIGIN: **SPAIN**
RELEASE: **SEPTEMBER 28**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E170**

Clive Barker's Jericho

Author, dreamweaver, visionary, plus game designer – Clive Barker lends his creative talents to this grisly demon-baiting squad shooter







Although every team member has unique and valuable skills, you will frequently find yourself switching between just three – Delgado for heavy fire, Black for range, and Church for her deadly combination of blood magic and melee

Exposed entrails, stapled eyelids, flayed skin, mechanical appendages and blood – lots of blood: you know where you are with Clive Barker. His is not the world of subtle psycho-terror, the uncanny creeping horror that gets under your skin and sets your hairs on end. Barker's strong suit, rather well represented by *Jericho*, is a bombardment of guts, gore, filth, flies and faecal matter. In a sense, his knack for the gruesome and macabre should be well-suited to videogames, and specifically to the shooter genre, which lends itself to the kind of shock and viscerality that Barker has explored in his films and fiction.

The previous game to carry Barker's name was the underrated *Undying*, although his direct collaboration on that project was minimal – with *Jericho*, Barker can exercise creative control over all its aspects. The plot appears to be no less hokey for this – a troupe of leather-clad psychic soldiers, known as Jericho Squad, plunge into a demonic rift to halt the apocalypse. There are some nice touches; the Middle Eastern city of Al Khali is the scene of this battle, and as the squad delve deeper into the rift, they pass through several slices of reality which preserve parts of the city during various periods in its history. From the modern day, we travel back to WWII, which saw the city under Nazi occupation, then further back to the Crusades, Roman Empire and before. In each period, the denizens of the city who have found themselves trapped in the rift have become horribly corrupted by the malevolent forces at work therein – cue ghostly children and chainmail-clad zombies with harpoons for hands.

Leather-clad psychic soldiers, known as Jericho Squad, plunge into a demonic rift to halt the apocalypse. They pass through parts of the city during periods in its history



But even though the story itself may add little to the game's action, the manner of its execution reveals a degree of panache that speaks well of Barker's involvement. If nothing else, the game seeks to establish a narrative coherency to its gimmicks – an achievement that almost goes unnoticed, so accustomed are we to game conventions not making the least bit of sense in regard to the gameworld itself. That cliché of videogames, the disappearance of corpses, becomes a grotesque spectacle rather than an embarrassment – bodies are consumed by clouds of flies. Similarly, the feature that promises to distinguish the game from other firstperson shooters, the ability to switch between squad members, is accounted for by the death of the protagonist, the psychic Captain Devin Ross, permitting his ghostly consciousness to possess the other members of his squad.



Hailing from a top secret branch of the US army's chaplaincy corps, each member of the six-strong squad (seven if you include Ross' spectral presence) is gifted with a unique set of equipment and magical abilities. To list a select few: the lumbering Frank Delgado has a chaingun and, more impressively, a fire spirit encased in his arm, which when released will swoop around searching for enemies to cremate; Abigail Black is a telekinetic sniper, able to direct the path of her bullets; Billie Church is a dab hand with a samurai sword, and can cast blood magic to entrap and reveal enemies.

The use of such abilities comes at the cost of health, temporarily reducing your hit points. Health recharges, however, and damage is only indicated by the screen becoming increasingly red and gory. Even when their hit points are completely



Jericho continues the tradition among videogames of clothing its female characters in impractical fetish gear. Isn't armour meant to cover up your soft, fleshy and vulnerable bits rather than expose them?



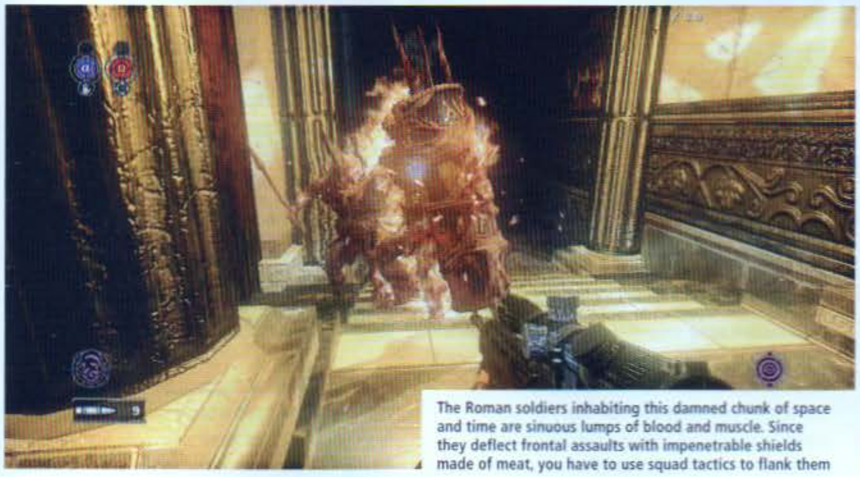




As you might expect, your foes are various and invariably horrid. Among the more distressing are these floating crusader child-warriors, who, trailing bowels and grizzling, lash out at you with elongated veins



Church's magic is powerful stuff, allowing you to set your enemies aflame or impale them to a spot with ethereal tendrils. However, it's a trade-off with your immediate health



The Roman soldiers inhabiting this damned chunk of space and time are sinuous lumps of blood and muscle. Since they deflect frontal assaults with impenetrable shields made of meat, you have to use squad tactics to flank them





depleted, your teammates never die, instead collapsing to the ground in mimicry of the 'down but not out' mechanic featured in *Gears Of War*.

And *Jericho* takes notes from *Gears* in other aspects, too – no character can jump (although Church can climb in certain context-sensitive instances) and the game is heavily centred on scripting bringing a cinematic quality to what is otherwise an entirely linear experience. Ominously, *Jericho* brings in QTEs, increasingly popular crutches for limited world interaction, to add some dynamism to these in-game cinematic sequences (all of which are viewed in firstperson). However, at least failure at a QTE is made less frustrating by rapid resets.

Each of your teammates' particular skills will be required at points and the squad will periodically find themselves divided, and sometimes individual characters isolated, forcing the player to experiment with different skillsets to progress. Interestingly, the game promises to combine the talents of different squadmates using a feature called threading. By threading Black's sniper skills with another character's astral projection abilities, the degree of control over her bullets is increased, allowing her to seek out more ambitious targets. It's an interesting idea, but with each character possessing a fair number of skills already, it remains to be seen if adding further abilities will ultimately overwhelm the player.

It has to be said, however, that those expecting frights from the game will largely be disappointed – *Jericho* is clearly a shooter, through and through, and while its obsession with exposed bowels and splatter may make a player raise their eyebrows in amused revulsion, it is unlikely to scare. Hopefully, the squad's variety alone will separate this game from others of its ilk, because *Jericho* packs more into this one gimmick than many shooters manage in their entirety.





Legionnaire's disease

The ability to switch between squadmates adds a degree of tactical thinking to the run-and-gun action. During your descent into Roman Empire-era Al Khali you encounter a giant, kitted out in gladiator's armour and skewered by dozens of spears that seem to have had little success in stopping him. His only vulnerability is a large and disturbingly vaginal wound running down his spine, which opens further as you shoot it. As he will turn to attack those who do the most damage, you have to continuously move between squadmates to keep his weak spot in your sights.

FORMAT: **COIN-OP, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **NAMCO BANDAI**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **SEPTEMBER (COIN-OP), TBA (PS3)**

Tekken 6

The world is a fine place, and worth fighting for





Heihachi could show Solid Snake a thing or two about staying power, as well as his own grandchildren – the impact wave is to emphasise a particularly strong connection from a power move. That'll hurt in the morning









There are three new characters confirmed so far – Leo, Miguel and Zafina (the latter in action above and rendered top right) – but the core roster remains classic *Tekken*, from Jack to King



I'll buff your ass to Japan and back

It's a universal truth that fighting games simply don't work online, and can't deliver the speed required for precision combat. Harada is rather more positive, pinpointing the PSP version of *Tekken: Dark Resurrection* as the first step with its ad-hoc mode, and keen to make the distinction between *Tekken* and 'key buffer' fighting games such as *VF* or *DOA*. Key buffer games show the result of a button press onscreen after a delay of a few frames, whereas in *Tekken* a command is immediately transformed into action. Harada claims that this brings a unique set of challenges to network play, but could ultimately result in the first online fighting game that actually works well. The upcoming 'online' update to *Dark Resurrection* for PSN is considered to be the testing ground for creating this aspect in the future console iterations of the series.

At a recent Bandai Namco private show, *Tekken* creator **Katsuhiro Harada** was on hand to talk about the sixth game in the core series, taking the opportunity to not only outline what the game is, but also what it isn't. *Tekken* won't be moving toward realistic visuals and physics: "That is not *Tekken* and not what we're interested in: but now we're doing the graphical things we always wanted." That's no great surprise: *Virtua Fighter* is about realism and simulation; *Tekken* stands for a level of surrealism and spectacle.

There is a clear improvement over the looks of *Tekken 5*: the light and shadows on the fighter models are spot on, and complemented by stages filled with light sources of various colours. If that weren't impressive enough, the stages feature objects in motion between the characters and light sources. A forest stage, for example, has the effect of a canopy outside of the screen filtering the light in a very realistic way. (If you find it all a huge distraction, you can simply smash up certain light sources.) As well as this, there are waves that lull and crash, snow that will crinkle under your feet and the usual destructible elements in the 12 stages confirmed so far. Harada was keen to point out that each background model was more detailed than any individual fighter in *Tekken Tag Tournament*, while all main characters have been built as nude 3D models and clothes are constructed individually. This allows some costume swapping between similarly sized characters, but he was keen to point out that "it was essential, otherwise the physics would have been strange," and to emphasise these throwaway details as being integral parts of the *Tekken* experience.



Tekken has traditionally steered away from destructible environments and other such oddities – but here they are

But, hands-on, *Tekken* remains *Tekken*, and this latest instalment doesn't change much. New additions include a Rage system which gives an increase to attack power when your life gauge falls to a dangerous level, adding a fire effect to your character's hands.

The most interesting aspect of this new *Tekken*, however, is nothing to do with the graphics or incremental new features. *Tekken 6* will use mobile phones as a key addition to the playing experience, whereby users can customise their character, view their changing ranking and go through personal records. Whereas Sega is creating coin-op cabinets that have a high installation cost and need a lot of floor space, Namco is trying to optimise *Tekken* so that it won't take up too much space and needs no dedicated applications (such as *Virtua Fighter*'s TV network). The community will be created through the users' mobile phones, informing players about an upcoming event where particular items can be won, for example. But networking is not yet the focus of *Tekken*, and there won't be any online fighting immediately, although ghost players can be exchanged.

And despite Harada's claims, the immediate difference to its predecessors is visual, with the background smashing and spectacular moves creating pugilistic fireworks around the action. There is great potential in the mobile phone/coin-op interplay, but it's unlikely to see widespread take-up outside of Japan, and the news on home online features will have to wait. *Tekken 6* is hovering between being a placeholder and taking the series to the next level: there's nothing here that's truly revolutionary yet, but some very interesting foundations.



The separate, yet intertwining, storylines of the two central characters see them fight their way across seven nightmarish and beautiful realms in the attempt to find resolution to their own personal traumas



Folklore

Although set in a remote Irish village, the Japanese origins of Folklore's fantastical adventure are wholly apparent

Two characters find themselves drawn to the mysterious town of Doolin – gateway to a netherworld of dreams where the spirits of the dead intermix with fantasy. Why are they here? How did they get here? Why aren't they more surprised to encounter talking scarecrows hanging around the local pub? The setting of *Folklore* may have its origins in western tradition, but its storytelling bears the hallmarks of eastern games, where narrative logic takes a back seat to enigma and aesthetic. From what's been shown so far, *Folklore*'s enigmas are many and fail to be clarified by its somewhat turgid dialogue, but the aesthetic is vibrant, varied and relentlessly charming, often exceeding the standards of beauty raised by the current generation of consoles.

You play as both the sceptic Keats, who believes his experiences on the island to be entirely hallucinatory (although isn't noticeably unnerved by this), and Ellen, an unhinged young lady searching for her long lost mother. Keats, begrudgingly on the payroll of a magazine covering paranormal events, receives a garbled phone call from a woman who claims the fairies are trying to kill her, and immediately sets off for Doolin to meet her. Arriving at the designated rendezvous just as Ellen turns up, they discover that Keats' contact has been murdered. Quite how they come to this conclusion without any inspection of the body is impossible to know, but you aren't here to dally in the pedantry of basic logic – the game would prefer to sweep you away on a relentless torrent of weird. And so the pair go their separate but variously intersecting ways, exploring a series of beautifully eerie worlds, each chaperoned by their own fantastical character – a scarecrow in Ellen's case, and the Invisible Man in Keats'.

These worlds are populated by dangerous creatures, known as Folk, with whom you must do battle. Once you have defeated an enemy, you can yank the soul from their body by jerking the Sixaxis upwards, allowing you to add their abilities to your repertoire of attack moves. With over 100 different Folk to battle through, the number of moves you can perform will be similarly numerous, but you can equip only four of these for use at any one time. Certain enemies will be more vulnerable to particular attacks, forcing you to approach your enemies in a certain order to absorb the skills that will give you better advantage, and adding a tactical quality to your decisions of which moves to equip.

With the executive producer of *Devil May Cry* and *Resident Evil*, Yoshiki Okamoto, at the helm, there's no doubt that the development team at Game Republic has the credentials to create the killer app that the PS3 so dearly needs. However, although these early glimpses of the game reveal a rich and alluring dreamworld, the full game will have to expand the scope of its interactions beyond alternate bouts of diverting combat and incoherent exposition in order to become truly legendary.





Folklore's creature designs are a triumph of imagination and break away from the stylistic tropes more commonly explored by JRPGs. There's more than a little whiff of Studio Ghibli about them, which can only be a good thing

The attacks you learn aren't agility-based hand-to-hand strikes: instead, you momentarily manifest the spirit of your defeated enemies, thus extending the variety of possible moves and adding further graphical panache



FORMAT: **PS3**
PUBLISHER: **SCEJ**
DEVELOPER: **GAME REPUBLIC**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **NOVEMBER**



Idle talk

Initially, the game's progression is driven by a series of conversations; the characters' dialogue appears as speech bubbles overlaying the scene, unnerving changes in the depth of field lending them a dreamlike quality. However, though the game is text-heavy, such conversations offer no alternative dialogue options. As such, the opening section of the game feels lacking in agency; the only point at which the player has control is during the walk from one lengthy conversation to another. Things pick up when you reach the Netherworld, however, when combat introduces a welcome degree of variety to your control.







Lair

Will Sixaxis-controlled flight carry this fantasy game to the heights expected of a flagship PS3 title?

FORMAT: **PS3**
PUBLISHER: **SONY**
DEVELOPER: **FACTOR 5**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **SEPTEMBER**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E169**



Monitor lizard

***Lair*'s world is a one of towering mountainous vistas, all rugged igneous rock below bruising skies – though it's not the geography so much as the cities that impress with their graphical detail. In fact, it sometimes proves tricky to orient yourself in this wilderness, especially since the over-enthusiastic implementation of HDR lighting effects washes out the screen every time your eye level wavers above or below the horizon. While this is perhaps realistic, it is frequently plain annoying, and it's an area in which Factor 5 will need to achieve better balance.**

If the announcement of the Sixaxis' motion sensor seemed a little bit like me-too-ism, then Sony's ambition to give the feature credibility has always rested on *Lair*'s scaly back. Little has emerged in the intervening time that justifies the control mechanism: the occasional title will cheapen itself with a hurriedly implemented balancing section, but the feature requires a game wholly dedicated to it – one that will go beyond *Flow*'s basic interpretation of rotation and more completely express the potential for tilt control.

Could anything better satisfy these demands than a representation of flying? And with *Lair*'s dragons, the Sixaxis can channel gentle manipulations of your controller into something substantially more dramatic – coaxing a winged behemoth into doing a mid-air somersault, or swooping beneath a bridge.

Hailing from Factor 5, the studio responsible for eminent spaceflight franchise *Rogue Squadron*, it's easy to assume that *Lair* should be in good hands – but clearly the control of a 40-tonne monster is only similar to an X-Wing in that it involves flight. Early previews have gone through several iterations of the control scheme, which articulate the control over your bestial transport with varying degrees of success – and many of the occasional flaws result from the difficulty of conveying organic movement in a fluid and elegant way. Currently, your mount rolls and banks in glorious unison with your own movements (resisting a little more with the steeper turns) but in other respects your dragon is not quite yet the perfect justification of Sixaxis motion sensing for which we were waiting – the 180-degree flip (activated by a sharp upwards jerk of the Sixaxis) is somewhat temperamental, and ground movement positively cumbersome, embarrassed further by an unhelpful camera.



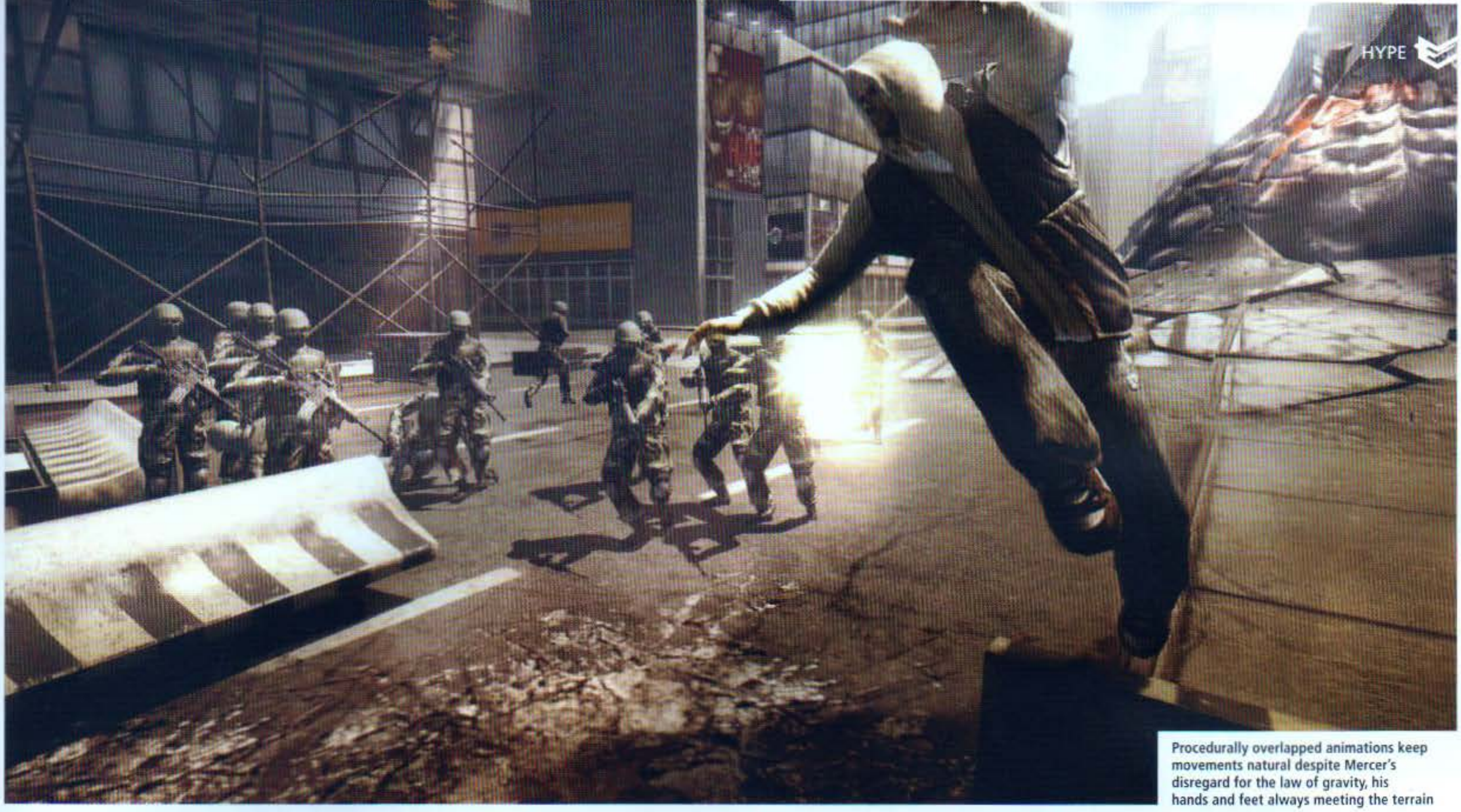
Although your interactions are limited at first, you learn more abilities and can upgrade equipment based on your performance during the completion of the main missions



Although ground combat is incredibly awkward, stomping through legions of foes provides a good deal of satisfaction – as does snatching up enemies and dropping them at height

No doubt the controls will continue to be tweaked as the development zeroes in on its release date, but beyond the occasional ungainliness of the game's core mechanic, early previews of *Lair* raise other concerns in its peripheral features and the manner in which the game ties together into a coherent whole – elements that are unlikely to see radical change between now and release.

In the several missions we got our claws into, play was continually interrupted by too-long cutscenes announcing events or the next objective, creating a jarring separation of the central gameplay from the overarching structure. Combat itself, though limited in the earlier stages of the game, promises to expand as you learn new moves, allowing you to hijack others' mounts. Hopefully, this is the manner in which the rest of the game progresses, expanding the scope of the missions and the manner in which they're resolved, creating a more fulfilling experience that will prove tha[t] the game is more than just a vessel for an unevenly implemented gimmick.



Procedurally overlapped animations keep movements natural despite Mercer's disregard for the law of gravity, his hands and feet always meeting the terrain

Prototype

Presenting the latest Radical experiment in sandbox dynamics

The biggest fear with this original IP – Radical's first after *Simpsons: Hit & Run*, *Hulk: Ultimate Destruction* and *Scarface: The World Is Yours* – is that it won't be as fresh as either its title or concept suggests.

Take Alex Mercer, for example, born of a top secret experiment gone wrong, blessed with superhuman powers and robbed of a past that the military will stop at nothing to keep hidden. A cross, perhaps, between Marvel's green giant and a regular sandbox antihero, he can outpace, outmanoeuvre and outmuscle the average soldier, but given the need for firepower can also commandeer military hardware.

His mutation, however, does more than jot a +1 next to his agility, stamina and strength. At a touch, he can 'steal' the properties of the world around him – an effects-heavy, immaculate model of modern-day New York City – as well as the likenesses of its individual citizens. The catch: he has to do so over their dead bodies, adding his victims to a DNA disguise portfolio.

It's a tough little ensemble to get across in pictures, or even single sentences. Taken on its own, each feature and glimpse of *Prototype* makes it look like one of the many games that's inspired it. If it's not the high-speed parkour of *Assassin's Creed* or the on-demand destruction of *Mercenaries*, it's the social stealth of *Destroy All Humans* or the sky-high bug hunting of *Earth Defense Force*. A more extreme example of Mercer's powers sees him plunge a mutated arm into the ground which then springs up and spikes his distant enemies. But even that brings to mind the Venom attacks of *Marvel Vs Capcom 2*.



A vital tool of social stealth or just another play to the Ecko Unlimited crowd? Given *Prototype*'s wide range of influences, Mercer's hoodie is probably a bit of both

Just as Mercer will no doubt find himself embroiled in a conspiracy much larger than he dared to imagine, it'll take a bigger picture than the one we've been shown to know just how *Prototype* will come together. The role of the game's alien influences, apparent in images of insect hordes and giant, nipple-like protrusions from the streets, has still to be revealed. We're told that some kind of contagion is sweeping through a city now subject to martial law. But who are the real enemies, where do your allegiances lie, and how much are you even suppposed to care?

This much is certain: *Prototype* will give you carte blanche to seek the truth, revenge, kicks and whatever else from its destructible environment. And as you can see from these early shots, the results are portrayed in unprecedented detail. Murderous identity thefts are just the tip of the iceberg, it seems, as everyday NPCs are burned, blasted and pulverised by Mercer's casual rampage.

A morally destitute revenge story, then, and one that looks sure to be of the dip-in/dip-out variety so popular with open worlds. With the usual bevy of sidequests bolstering the key missions, and potentially Mercer's elemental skillset, *Prototype* hasn't forgotten the rules of the urban playground, even if its desire to hoard all the toys for itself could one day prove its undoing.

FORMAT: **TBC**
PUBLISHER: **VIVENDI**
DEVELOPER: **RADICAL**
ORIGIN: **CANADA**
RELEASE: **TBC**



Gotham project

Given the enormous investment Radical's made in its realistic New York City, which basks authentic landmarks and bustling crowds in soft shadows and dynamic light, it follows that *Prototype* will indulge explorative and destructive urges in equal measure. Mercer's athleticism can scale even the tallest of the city's skyscrapers, offering stunning vantage points over its skyline and vital hints as to his identity and purpose. A 'web of intrigue' system divides the game's story into collectable clues, advancing the plot in a uniquely non-linear fashion.





Battle Chess had unique animations for every possible encounter. With a much greater number of creatures this is tricky indeed, so the attack animations here are generic and, as such, fail to convey a sense of physical impact

FORMAT: **PS3**
PUBLISHER: **SONY**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **NOVEMBER**

Eye Of Judgment

Battle Chess meets Magic: The Gathering in one of the first games to be packaged alongside PlayStation Eye

Card games are often deep, strategic and complex. A visceral expression of combat they are not. Up until now, videogames that have sought to recreate the success of fantasy card collection games like Magic: The Gathering have failed to pick up on this as an area on which their digital equivalents can build. *Eye Of Judgment* cleverly straddles both the virtual and paper varieties, using the PlayStation Eye to recognise the cards as you physically place them on the mat in front of it, and then bringing those battles to life onscreen.

Being sold alongside the Eye itself, the game will also come with a starter set of cards, to which you can add by buying further packs, eventually amassing an elite selection of monsters and spells with which to do battle, probably at great expense. It's a potentially lucrative scheme, and clearly Sony knows its market: garish, overblown effects pummel the vision and, combined with a thrashing metal soundtrack, it's clearly built to appeal to a pubescent demographic.

Despite its visual hyperactivity, however, the action of the game itself is hardly frenetic: a grid of nine squares represents the playing field, and at the beginning of each round these squares are assigned an element – earth, air, fire or water. Selecting five cards from their respective packs, players will take it in turns to summon the creatures described on the cards. Each creature corresponds to an element and receives bonuses and penalties depending on the square upon which it is placed. If a creature is summoned on a square adjacent to that of an enemy's beast they will fight, enacting a brief cutscene in which one surprisingly low-poly model slashes at another. The success or failure of this attack is determined by the creatures' stats and other modifiers, such as the direction its opponent is facing when attacked.

The game's goal is to have a creature placed on five out of the nine squares first – which you'd think would immediately favour the player to place the first card, but such simple strategy is complicated by a range of special cards and spells that force changes to the battlefield, reactivating dormant cards and changing the arrangement of elements at play on the table.

Eye Of Judgment will be an interesting test, not simply as one of the first games to make real use of the Eye, but because it combines two opposed payment schemes.

Ensnaring players into collectible card games relies on many small purchases – which is quite opposed to the large initial cost involved in obtaining a PS3. By offering the card game as a standalone to the PS3 game, however, its success need not rely on the console's existing playerbase – exploiting the points at which it intersects with the card game's demographic while acting as a cross-promotional tool.





Skeletons versus Beastmen – that age-old conflict. The character models are colourful and cheerfully monstrous, designed with a fairly young target audience in mind

Card-collection games have a limited coherency when it comes to world building but, as abstractions, manage to get away with it. By contrast, *Eye Of Judgment*'s bizarre bestiary looks mildly ludicrous when lined up together on the board



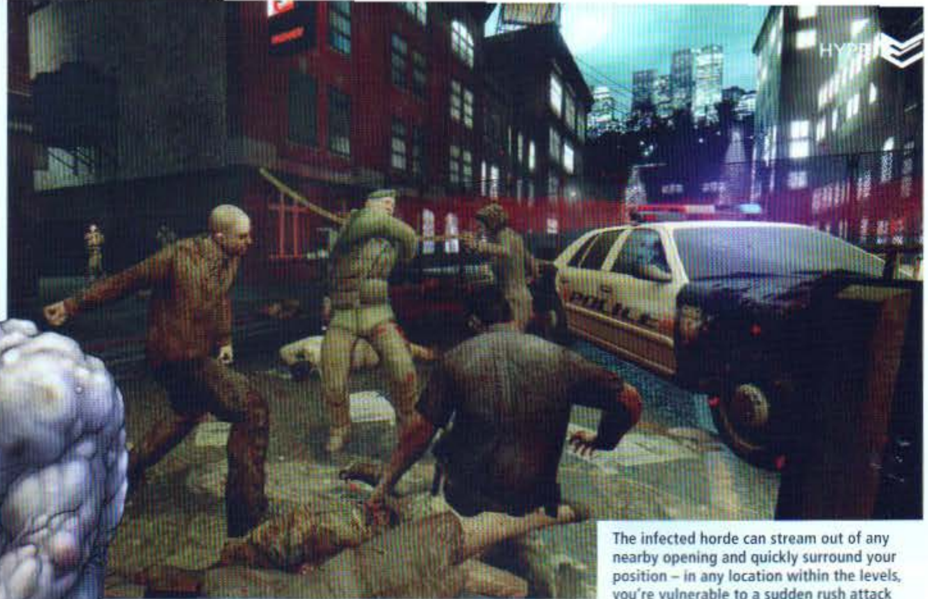




Pack animals

The means by which the Eye recognises cards is through a simple barcode system, green arrows on the side of each card indicating its orientation to the camera. However, there is as yet no way of protecting the cards from being photocopied – or even their barcodes replicated by hand. Although it'd be obvious if your opponent was using a knocked-off card in a face-to-face encounter, how Sony combats the possibility of spoofing barcodes may prove to be essential to the game's success online. It will certainly reduce the value of traded cards if collectors are effectively able to keep the card despite physically selling it on.









The infected horde can stream out of any nearby opening and quickly surround your position – in any location within the levels, you're vulnerable to a sudden rush attack

Left 4 Dead

Has it really been 28 days since the last zombie game?

Valve and Turtle Rock must *really* hope that Danny Boyle doesn't play this. As 28 Days Later in all but name, this game casts you as one of four survivors in a world full of the 'infected' – rabid zombie creatures that are savage, fast and deadly. The object of the game is simply to survive while moving between safepoints, as the horde surrounds and attacks your team at every step.

The weapons are relatively simple: you carry a pistol, there are shotguns, submachine guns, two types of bomb and ammo in the safepoints, and you'll come across the odd M16 on your travels. That's just about it: the infected go down relatively easily with this hardware, but it's the pace and number of them that cause the problems. Within this is *Left 4 Dead*'s secret trump card: the 'director'. This is a proprietary AI engine that regulates the flow of the infected within each location: if you've just had a particularly torrid time, it may allow you to catch your breath and take some painkillers; if you're slicing through the horde like a hot knife, it might just send an army after you. It makes a noticeable difference to each playthrough of a particular location, and can be nerve-shreddingly good at punctuating lulls with rushes and vice versa. The 'director' moves *Left 4 Dead* away from repetition over its relatively low tally of stages (all five of which, however, are fairly large and segmented), and combines extremely well with the foundations for team play.

This team play is *Left 4 Dead*'s real strength: it feels like a multiplayer FPS rather than an FPS with a multiplayer option. Co-operative is absolutely essential, as no individual can survive the frequent infected surges. They pour out of the levels towards your team from windows, alleys, rooftops, behind doors, cars, and anywhere in buildings. It can be a genuinely overwhelming experience, where each member of the team has to be in a relevant position and watching the back of another. There are several particular varieties of the infected that specialise in sowing confusion: the Hunter will make quick stealth strikes from hiding; the Boomer will blind allies and spread infected-attracting muck around; while the Smoker will simply pluck a team member from the group with their prehensile tongues and cut them off with smog. Every time a comrade falls, your team simply has to refocus on saving them – because with four it's hard enough, but the descent after that is lightning fast.

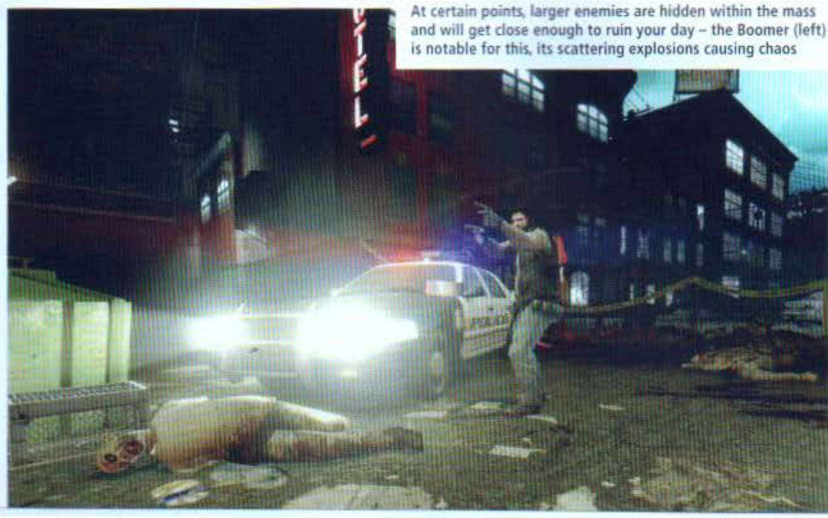
The game is full of other features – the opportunity to play as one of the infected, set-piece battles of real quality, and a variety of environments – but it comes down very simply to the sheer fun of the co-operative experience against a relentless foe. *Left 4 Dead* is markedly different from the field it's up against, and is shaping up to be a taut and focused experience that could stand apart from the more obvious FPS sensations at the end of 2007.





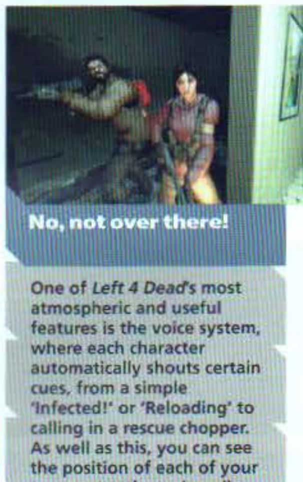
If a teammate takes too much damage they're knocked to the ground – they can continue defending themselves with pistols, but are easy prey for the infected to surround, and have to be helped to their feet quickly





At certain points, larger enemies are hidden within the mass and will get close enough to ruin your day – the Boomer (left) is notable for this, its scattering explosions causing chaos

FORMAT: **360, PC**
PUBLISHER: **VALVE**
DEVELOPER: **TURTLE ROCK STUDIOS**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **AUTUMN**



No, not over there!

One of *Left 4 Dead*'s most atmospheric and useful features is the voice system, where each character automatically shouts certain cues, from a simple 'Infected!' or 'Reloading' to calling in a rescue chopper. As well as this, you can see the position of each of your teammates through walls when in the same building, and instantly notice if they've been felled or attacked by the infected. It suits the tension and co-op mechanic of the game extremely well, particularly as you'll have to react to new threats on the fly rather than planning ahead, and will often be too focused on simply getting together to fight the infected to monitor your own character's situation.

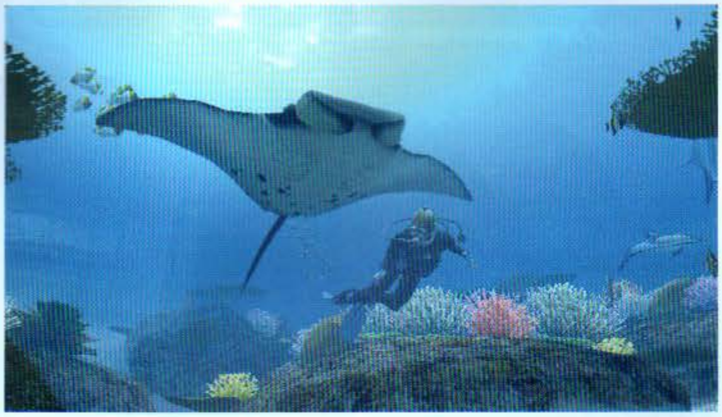
FORMAT: **Wii**
PUBLISHER: **NINTENDO**
DEVELOPER: **ARIKA**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **OUT NOW (JAPAN), TBA(UK)**

Forever Blue

Octopus's garden sadly not included







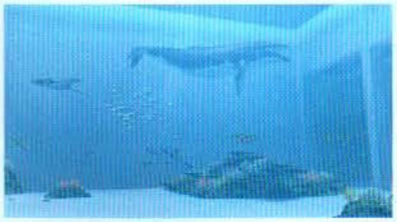
The environments are brilliantly realised, from the delicate surface lighting to the technicolor corals that lie beneath the waves. With behaviour patterns accurately replicated, the animals are fascinatingly alien

Forever Blue's predecessor, *Everblue*, was somewhat of a UFO on the PS2 radar when released in 2001, a diving game with a collecting and trading element at its heart and a diverting change of pace. *Forever Blue* has the same concept, but the Wii has given it a new lease of life.

The incorporation of the entire system is thoughtful, from swimming with the Remote, changing direction with a flick, to being the first game to use the SD card port so that you can play your favourite MP3s while exploring. Best of all, there's the option to explore with a friend using wifi, and there's an undeniable peacefulness to moving slowly through the vast blue, simply watching the world go by.

Forever Blue is interesting because of its focus on an experience rather than an A-to-B progression. The player swims through a variety of environments in the South Pacific, exploring caves, sunken ships and coral reefs, and finding marine life. Depending on the type of fish or mammal, you may be able to interact with it, such as patting a dolphin (which you can become friends with and train), or simply float and observe their behaviour – whereupon the game will offer useful tidbits like the scientific name of the species. For a more structured exploration, there is the option of a job as a diving guide which offers missions such as exploring an area or photographing all 288 types of fish: all logged in your journal, which will surely become a matter of personal pride to see complete. The boundless main has rarely looked so inviting.







Forever Blue **definitely has a lighter side to the peaceful exploration of the oceans, from aquariums to a rookery of penguins on the well-scrubbed decks of your boat**

Burnout Paradise

Looking for adventure, and whatever comes our way

FORMAT: **360, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **EA**
DEVELOPER: **CRITERION**
ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE: **TBA**





Although the cities can initially look like faithful recreations of a sane road system, driving on them quickly reveals a raft of hidden ramps, stunt locations and obstacles just begging to be exploited

Driving madly and badly has always been the core of *Burnout*, the series that positively reinforces playing chicken with oncoming traffic and performing spectacular 'takedown' manoeuvres on your fellow drivers. The first for the current generation of consoles (barring the 360 port of *Burnout Revenge*) is looking to keep that core of recklessness within an open structure built to surround an ad-hoc attitude to street racing.

Set in Paradise City, the game lets you explore, race and crash your way around a seamless play area with no loading times or even menus, where beginning races is as easy as pulling up next to a like-minded car on the same road. It's a bold move in the online arena, but the emphasis is still on spectacular stunts and ridiculously fast racing, all flashed up on screen (such as 'closest near miss') and logged on your 'Burnout License'.

In terms of the stylings and graphical polish, the game is still *Burnout* through and through. Cars are slick and shiny when pristine, and the slow-motion crash animations are, as ever, better than life: as you plough into barriers, the game shows the vehicle crumpling like an accordion as shards of glass and metal fly all over.

Burnout Paradise, pretty as it is, looks exactly like you'd expect, but that will do nothing to deter fans. Whether it is 'just' another instalment in the series or a new beginning in the new generation rests very much on those promised innovations in the online formula.





The game looks great, particularly in its use of lighting effects. Unfortunately, you can only really appreciate them as your car smashes into a wall in slow motion













The layout should be immediately familiar to fans of Harmonix's previous work, each scrolling bar, from left to right respectively, representing lead guitar, drums and bass guitar, while the vocals float separately



The grungy feel of *Guitar Hero's* aesthetics carries over into *Rock Band*, though the songs will be as mainstream as you like. The tracks available will be updated weekly on each console's network, and will include full albums

Rock Band

Don't lean on me, man, 'cos you can't afford the peripherals

FORMAT: **360, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **EA**
DEVELOPER: **HARMONIX**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **WINTER 2007**

Thank you, bedroom, you've been a great audience! *Guitar Hero's* one of those titles that it's hard to remember not being able to play, though it's only a scant two years since the release of the original. But with the development of the third in the series handed over to Neversoft, Harmonix has been free to concentrate on the game that will herald the true next step. *Guitar Hero* was always a fantastically guilty pleasure solo but an unstoppable riot in company, so the progression of the proven formula to multiplayer in *Rock Band* makes complete sense.

More than any other game, *Rock Band* is about the input. The guitar peripherals are weightier, look much closer to a real guitar and have several new tweaks: the colour of the fret buttons is now displayed on the side of the peripheral's neck rather than under your fingers, and the coloured frets are reproduced in slightly smaller form at the base of the neck. The former makes it easier to check the relative position of your fingers and the latter, though not yet seen in use, allows nimble fingerwork for solos without the necessity of strumming. The drumkit consists of four drums, a foot pedal for bass, and drumsticks, and have the aural synchronicity with the onscreen action that is a Harmonix trademark, as well as several solo opportunities within each song. These instruments work in the way we've come to expect, with a vertical scroll of notes towards a play line, and each has a unique bonus factor – the lead guitar can, of course, use star power; the bass guitar can get into a 'bass groove' with a score multiplier higher than any other instrument; and the drums get a chance for freeform fills.

As well as the instruments, there's the microphone for budding Bowies, which has its own quiet innovations. As well as freeform vocal sections for your own lungbursters, it can recognise phonemes as well as rhythm and pitch – which essentially means the end of *SingStar*-style humming and demands actual singing.

The only barrier to world domination is an inevitably high price-tag for the full group of peripherals, although this should be mitigated by the option to buy as much or as little as is needed, while the ability to use your old 360 *Guitar Hero* controller is a welcome bonus. The feeling remains, however, that online will take a distant back seat to real world co-op, and it may feel a little hollow to buy the game without a least a couple of peripherals. But that unavoidable problem of cost apart, it's very hard to see anything wrong with *Rock Band* as a game or a concept. For those of us who can't play a real instrument, and even those who can, the next big gig is just around the corner. Drum roll, please.





I am the one and only

Rock Band has room for licences: dozens of them. This should mean that pretty much every possible taste of music is catered for, and confirmed tracks so far include Bowie's Suffragette City, The Who's Won't Get Fooled Again and Blue Oyster Cult's Don't Fear the Reaper, and we won't mention The Hives or Weezer. Even the guitar is licensed: specifically, it's a Stratocaster. Your rock-god avatar can also be built from scratch and customised before being unleashed online. The level of customisation has not yet been shown, although if the chance to perform _Forza_-esque paintjobs on your beautiful, tender instrument isn't included then colour us melancholy.



If writing about music is like whistling about sex, then writing about still screens of *Rock Band* can seem similarly futile. The visuals take a distinct back seat to the rest of the game, but do look suitably spruced up from 360 *Guitar Hero* and, to be fair, the aesthetic is great for distinct rock cliché personalities









The game looks closer than any ever has to Springfield's uniquely vibrant world, and the levels move from Grand Theft Scratchy (left) to the outskirts (below), where Mr Burns is turning all of the town's trees into toothpicks

The Simpsons Game

Another extension of the media empire means Matt Groening's raking in the d'oh

FORMAT: **360, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **EA**
DEVELOPER: **EA REDWOOD**
ORIGIN: **USA**
RELEASE: **AUTUMN**

Take a deep breath before the next sentence. *The Simpsons Game* looks like it *could actually be quite good.* Despite there being more than 20 years of Simpsons culture in various forms, there has never been a great videogame based around the characters – not even the generic side-scrolling arcade game, and definitely not *Bart Vs The Space Mutants*. It's not difficult to pinpoint why it's never translated well: developers have preferred to shoehorn the licence into a game rather than creating a game around the characters.

In this sense, at least, *The Simpsons Game* is a masterstroke thanks to one simple touch: they know they're in a game. Similarly to the Treehouse of Horror episodes, this premise is the scaffolding for a host of parodies of classic games within the context of the Simpsons universe. The game's episodes can be accessed from a central Springfield hub, and their titles range from the inspired to the groanworthy: Bartman Begins, Medal of Homer and Shadow of the Colossal Donut being three of the former. In each level the characters are dressed according to theme, and the emphasis is on homage and mockery of games and gaming culture in general. There are numbered Collectable Game Clichés, for example, while on the waterfront you'll pass a banner advertising God of Wharf's hot clam chowder while fighting off killer zombie dolphins.

But perhaps the greatest achievement of the game are the visuals. The graphics are remarkable in motion, and supersede any previous cartoon-to-game attempt by some distance – indeed, EA boasts of three separate and patented technologies allowing this fidelity to the source material. As well as looking good static, the camera effortlessly glides into moments of visual cleverness in keeping with the game's feel – in a section where Lisa has to cross a river, the view quickly switches to an overhead perspective that is immediately reminiscent of *Frogger*.





The Simpsons' version of Kratos can be seen in the background above, a level set on Springfield pier complete with Kang, Kodos and killer dolphins

At one point in another level, a door leads to a secret area that is perfect *Wolfenstein* – except in this case it is 'Hoofenstein', complete with farmyard Nazi imagery.

The game is packed with these incidental in-jokes, and thanks to the 55 minutes of original cartoon and cinematics within the game, all voiced by the Simpsons cast, promises to be full of humour. Despite the geek stylings, there is obviously hope that *The Simpsons Game* can be a truly mainstream success, and to this end there is co-op throughout: each level features two characters from the family, and players can drop in and out as required. Each character has their own particular style of play: Bart can change into Bartman and use zip-lines and his slingshot, Homer turns into a fat ball which can negotiate ramps and flatten foes, while Lisa proves surprisingly powerful with her 'Hand of Buddha' power which allows rearrangement of the world from top-down.

Gaming's fourth wall has been broken many times, from *Monkey Island* to *Paper Mario*, but rarely with so much glee. There's a lot to be seen yet, and the game looks worryingly superficial in certain aspects but, remarkably, this has a chance of being worthy of its inspiration.

Needless to say, this is the Shadow of the Colossal Donut level, featuring the Lard Lad mascot chasing Bart and Homer – and a *SOTC*-style resolution





Cheese eating surrender monkeys

The Medal of Homer level begins with either Bart or Homer falling into the level à la *Medal Of Honor: Airborne*. After landing in the French village, German youngster Uter throws a rock at one of their windows and the entire population surrenders. All very PC. Your first objective in the level is thus to prevent the French from surrendering by stealing their white flags, which are carried by hand, stick out of windows and display on roofs. Yet there is some superficiality: the term 'parody' was effortlessly bandied around by the developers, yet *Medal Of Honor*, an FPS, simply can't be 'parodied' in thirdperson. The game will work well as a series of game-themed thirdperson levels, but those looking for any sort of truly in-depth deconstruction of what makes certain games great shouldn't be under any illusions.





FORMAT: **PS3**
PUBLISHER: **SCEE**
DEVELOPER: **NINJA THEORY**
ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE: **SEPTEMBER**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E164**

Heavenly Sword

Despite the approaching release date, this long-awaited PS3 exclusive is still a little reticent to show its hand

Nariko still flips and leaps with grace, still slashes and snaps opponents with horrifying force – but it's easy to wonder if the game's protracted development has left the title chasing the zeitgeist, rather than leading it. Action cinema's obsession with balletic wire-fu has now expired, with parkour rapidly becoming its ubiquitous replacement. Although it's premature to say that games have moved on too, there are definitely plenty of titles already filling the space that *Heavenly Sword* would like to dominate. *God Of War* provided some similarly stylish high-fantasy slashing fare and managed to spawn a sequel too, all in the time *Heavenly Sword* has been in development.

This said, the contributions made to *Heavenly Sword* by CG-puppeteer and actor Andy Serkis still leave optimism that the game will be brought considerable class through its script as much as through its setting and action. Although preview code suggests that, graphically, the game is beginning to slide from the absolute cutting edge, it is still driven by a cogent and enticing art direction – and mechanically, the fighting is surely no less entertaining. The division of the combat style into three stances – speed, range and power – offsets the button-mashing with a degree of consideration. Enemies briefly flash the colour associated with each stance before they attack, indicating to which they will be most vulnerable.



As Nariko unleashes twirling death, her hair floats around her with the weightlessness of vapour. Much of the game has this uncanny beauty to it, consciously avoiding a pursuit of realism

Another nice touch is the ability to pick up weapons (or, indeed, hats) dropped by your enemies and hurl them, gently steering the projectile through the air. But there will need to be more than a few nice touches to set *Heavenly Sword* apart from its competitors, and with so little being shown this close to the release date concerns are naturally rising as to whether the title will be able to live up to its original announcement as the pinnacle of (then) next-generation ambitions.





Mercenaries 2: World In Flames

Pandemic cranks up the destruction while paying respect to a different type of green awareness

FORMAT: **360, PC, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **EA**
DEVELOPER: **PANDEMIC**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **WINTER 2007**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E163**





The original *Mercenaries* was an accomplished shooter that quickly established itself as a cult favourite, but it was always a brilliant sequel waiting to happen rather than a home run. The universe was robust, but the action within it seemed somehow arbitrary – in one sense, a perfect reflection of a mercenary's life, on the other a frustrating game model.

A recent playable demo of the sequel gave the player a rocket launcher, an assault rifle, and free reign. The developers claim that almost every bit of scenery seen, from foliage to buildings, will be destructible – and there will, of course, be both civilian and enemy structures for demolition. To assist with the latter, air-strikes can be called in and various tools and vehicles can be bought (your actions are continually rewarded with a flow of the mighty dollar), but they all boil down to varyingly expensive ways of creating a big bang. Vehicles can be hijacked with QTEs, gaming's current bullet-time, which may grow tired over extended play – although with over 200 available the vehicle roster surely won't.

New features include online co-op, the ability to establish your own mercenary company and some improvements to the first game's nagging flaws: your mercenary can now swim, for example, rather than simply drowning. *Mercenaries 2* looks, at this stage, like a lot of big dumb fun: concentrating on driving and explosions while adapting a riotous co-op à la *Crackdown* could be what elevates the game from a singular detonation to a repeating blast.



The effects of gratuitous fire with big weapons can be delightful, as cars burn and buildings tremble – and that helicopter's next on the list





The environments of the original could sometimes seem a little sterile, but *Mercenaries 2* promises a level of detail within its extensive range that should bring some real personality into conflict

FORMAT: **360, PC**
PUBLISHER: **PLAY TEN**
DEVELOPER: **DEEP SHADOWS**
ORIGIN: **UKRAINE**
RELEASE: **FEBRUARY**



White Gold

Will the irrepressibly ambitious Deep Shadows be able to rein in all of its ideas this time?

You may remember Deep Shadows' last effort, *Boiling Point: Road To Hell* (**E**151), in which the developer's near lunatic level of ambition completely outstripped its ability to actually make a working game. It deserves credit for creating an entirely open world back when open worlds were a fresh idea, but the developers really distinguished themselves by then comprehensively undoing any goodwill engendered by this achievement through abysmal implementation and a relentless torrent of bugs.

White Gold is a sequel pulled from the same mould; a free-roaming firstperson shooter-cum-RPG set in a tropical environment filled with multiple warring factions. You'd think that Deep Shadows would be making good on the previous game's faults – primarily rising from an overabundance of ideas and a lack of quality control – but, considering that an early trailer shows the player riding on the back of a shark, the indications are that the team is still no less compulsively scattershot in its approach to game design.

In fact, Deep Shadows has had so many ideas that it's had to split them between two games – *White Gold* for the fans of semi-real-world, free-roaming, banana-republic, shark-surfing insurgent action, and *The Precursors* (see below) for those who want essentially the same format but set in space, thus extending even further the range of Deep Shadows' maniacal creativity.

The developers have always driven towards maximum player freedom, with a bafflingly inconsistent and sometimes unnecessary obsession with minutiae, and that looks likely to be replicated here. But although taping together as many ideas as possible into a messy bundle does not make for a good game, what really matters is that at least some of these ideas are actually finished. With a little under half a year left in development, hopefully Deep Shadows will stop adding features to the game and focus on ensuring that the ones already there work.



One big improvement with the engine is evident in the vastly improved loading times, which seem almost instantaneous. The game's environments aren't up to *Crysis*' standard, but they do a fine job all the same









Boiling Point's bugs included flying jaguars and being able to blow up a police station with a single crossbow bolt. Let's hope that there's more commitment to QA this time around



FORMAT: **360, PC**
PUBLISHER: **PLAY TEN**
DEVELOPER: **DEEP SHADOWS**
ORIGIN: **UKRAINE**
RELEASE: **SPRING 2008**

The Precursors

Not content with one free-roaming world, Deep Shadows makes a solar system full of them

Though using essentially the same interface and core gameplay mechanics as *White Gold* (see above), *The Precursors*' sci-fi setting opens the floodgates to Deep Shadows' hyperactive imagination. It's attention deficit disorder as game design: the game packs in everything *White Gold* has and then more. As well as being a free-roaming, firstperson RPG shooter, *The Precursors* comes coupled with an entire *Freelancer*-style spaceflight portion.

It's certainly not just a prettified transport sequence, either – many missions will take place wholly within this environment. However, players more interested in the game's RPG and shooter elements have the option to opt out of these space-sim sections entirely and use teleports to travel to and from the various planets. These worlds offer a considerable range of different aesthetics, showing that the engine can adequately serve a variety that extends well beyond the tropical islands of *White Gold*.

Then there are the weapons – as bright, mad and without restraint as the rest of the game. Many are organic: tendril-covered, undulating, gooey things whose ammo is fed to them in the form of critters you find scuttling about the environments.

There's no shortage of ideas; the game has mech battles and a trading system with a complex circulation of goods, too. No doubt much more is in store but, as with all things Deep Shadows, it remains to be seen how successfully implemented it will all be, or whether the company's kleptomaniac design strategy will get ahead of it.



The Precursors isn't ashamed to borrow ideas – every staple sci-fi environment is accounted for here: ruddy Martian wildernesses, Tatooine-esque dust-bowls, and planets covered in plantlife



Just as you are able to aggressively board your enemies' vessels, so they are yours: at some points you may find yourself forced to fight off unwelcome visitors





HEAVY REIGN

You bear the king's burden in this monstrous hack-and-slash accompaniment to the upcoming Zemeckis film

At the risk of spoiling the thousand-year-old story: Beowulf fights three monsters, and gets killed by the last one. At first glance, it seems like that might make it a pretty awful idea for a game. *Shadow Of The Colossus* showed that the hoary, tired cliché of the boss battle could actually be done well, but even that featured a few more than three. It would take a fair amount of ingenuity to turn the limitations of Beowulf's setting into a compelling game experience – but rather than grapple with that precise challenge, Ubisoft's Montpelier-based team have elected instead to expand the setting beyond that detailed in the legend, filling out Beowulf's life with more game-friendly scenarios.

But, if this sounds unfair, there are other, better, reasons for stepping outside the source material: undergoing concurrent development with Robert Zemeckis' film, Ubisoft is keen that its bloody recreation of the Beowulf myth isn't seen as a poor cousin to its cinematic version, so creating a game of complementary rather than cloned content seems only sensible. From what is known, it would appear that the film follows the basic outline of the poem reasonably faithfully, although not chronologically – visiting the king at the end of his life, and then darting back to describe his defeat of the monster Grendel, Grendel's mother, and his rise to power. *Beowulf* the game, meanwhile, approaches the subject matter with a greater remit for creation, essentially acting to fill in the gaps between each of these episodes, amounting to about 30 years in total. In doing so, Ubisoft Montpelier has been required to invent many further threats for Beowulf to face, borrowing from Anglo-Saxon myth to fill out the decades of Beowulf's reign.

"We have about 30 years which are completely different from what's in the movie," says **Adrian Lacey**, Ubisoft's international brand manager. "In the game it will progress naturally, whereas in the film it jumps to when you're old and then you have flashbacks. There has to be continuity and flow for a player, he has to progress – when we explained that to the filmmakers it was cool, because they really understood it. We're making a game. As long as we stay within the spirit of the movie, we can go crazy with those 30 years. The film's all about how Beowulf becomes this tormented soul, and so in that 30-year space we fleshed out the sources of his torment – he fights various titans from Nordic mythology, giant bloodthirsty trolls, crazy creatures, giant sea serpents and what have you."

The game sequence we've seen showed Beowulf ascending a ruined flight of steps leading up to a demonic chapel of sorts, looming above a glowering red landscape. Beowulf's foes seemed to be that staple of Nordic legend – a horde of voodoo cultists. More Baron Samedi than Baldr, our hero dispatched them in vicious

TITLE: **BEOWULF**
FORMAT: **360, PC, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **UBISOFT**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **FRANCE**
RELEASE: **NOVEMBER**





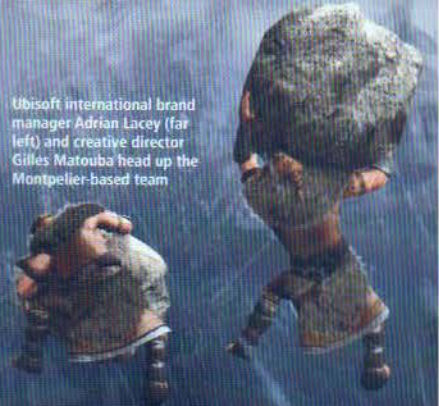


FEARSOME ENGINE

Built with a further iteration of the Yeti engine that was used for *GRAW* and *GRAW2*, *Beowulf* is certainly visually arresting – and it needs to be, given that its cinematic sibling will be pushing the envelope in terms of visual effects. The Yeti technology benefits the game in other ways: "One of the things that we're doing is dynamic loading," says Lacey. "It's one of the things that everybody went on about at the beginning of this generation, but people seem to have forgotten about dynamic loading. We had it in *GRAW* and we're doing it now too."



Ubisoft international brand manager Adrian Lacey (far left) and creative director Gilles Matouba head up the Montpelier-based team



fashion. Beowulf appears to be quite hands-on in his approach to combat: less hack-and-slash, more grab-twist-and-snap.

"You do a lot of grabbing in the game," says Lacey. "You grab people, punch them repeatedly in the face, rip their heads off and tear off their balls. We're a mature game."

As well as grabbing, Beowulf has a fair number of other options at his disposal. "Beowulf can climb, he can parry – he has a series of combos and moves he can do," says Lacey. "We try to keep it fairly simplistic in terms of combat systems – there are combinations of moves that you put together that give you a variety of finishing moves and so on. Obviously all the objects that are on the ground you can pick up and use. Your weapons all have a finite life – if you use Carnal Rage your weapons will break much more quickly."

Carnal Rage is a berserker mode which increases the power of your attacks at the expense of your ability to direct them. Though the sheer frenetic brutality of this mode makes it a tempting feature, Beowulf will attack and kill anything nearby, including his own men. It's this last aspect that sets the game apart from other gory fantasy beat 'em ups, like *God Of War*: your men are an important part of the game – you are able to direct them in combat and they provide the man-power to perform vital tasks a single man could not. With the core team behind *Beowulf* being the same as that behind *Advanced Warfighter*, it's no surprise that there is an element of squad gameplay.

"There are definitely elements that we took from *GRAW* and tried to apply slightly differently to *Beowulf*," says Lacey. "It's sort of a team-based hack-and-lead. But it's not especially anachronistic; if you look at it, the vikings were like the Dark Ages' marines. Technologically, they had the best armour and weaponry of the day. We're talking sixth century, so in terms of their swords, chainmail, their drakkars and the way they fought and their tactics, there was a certain amount of intelligence. I mean, they pretty much conquered most of Europe and even went as far as America. There are certain similarities we could find with the elite troops of today, and the way we used the squad in *Ghost Recon* isn't so different. The way you can get your men to attack different positions, for example. And the vertical gameplay: I can climb up here and still order my men down there."

But your thanes have importance beyond their usefulness in combat – in fact your treatment of them is an essential feature of the game. The game's creative director, **Gilles Matouba**, explains: "The idea that is at the core of the movie – and it's an idea we've tried to place as the centre of our game – is that Beowulf is not a spotless hero. He's a really conflicted figure, basically torn between two basic impulses: his selfishness as a monster-fighter and his selflessness as a leader and king. So as a young, arrogant warrior he's selfish and because of that he's cursed. So after, he's become king, and spent 30 years lying to his men, he has to pay the

"You grab people, punch them repeatedly in the face, rip their heads off and tear off their balls. We're a mature game"







Beowulf claims to draw the inspiration for its many monsters from Nordic legend, but it looks like the team will be interpreting that remit quite leniently



consequences in that final battle. So that's what we tried to recreate in our game: the two sides of power."

To this end, the extent to which Beowulf acts as a lone agent on the battlefield affects the morale of his men. An indicator pops up when one of your thanes is in trouble, and choosing to save him will make your team a more effective fighting force. Further, your behaviour is reflected in the depiction of your rule via the game's hub at the centre of your kingdom.

"As you progress and behave more heroically, your kingdom becomes more evidently prosperous," says Lacey. "Your people react to you, so if you've been good to your men on the battlefield, they'll come into your hub, your castle, and cheer you. Of course, if you've given in to temptation, and spent all your time on your own smashing things up in Carnal Rage, you'll have become this miserable-ass king, who just looks out for himself, and the people will curse you."

"It's a simple feedback system," says Matouba, "but I hope it puts a mirror up to the way the player behaves."

This idea of the kingdom reflecting your behaviour may not be groundbreaking, but it is the avenue via which the game delivers its major themes and ideas, introducing minor RPG elements like upgrading your weapons and the equipment that your thanes wear.

"The kingdom's evolution – we really tried to apply that to everything," says Lacey. "Your own character in the game gets older, so do all your thanes, your wife, your mistress and all the other people. Your kingdom evolves as well."

"It's mythological, but it's also part historical," continues Matouba. "We want the player to travel from the mythology of the Dark Ages to a period that is more believable – to a world dominated by Christianity. So towards the end there are more and more churches, the enemies you face are more historical – barbarian invasions instead of giant monsters."

However, it's clear that while this idea might well be investigated profoundly in Zemeckis' film, using the legend as a metaphor for the extinguishing of pagan faith and the rise of Christianity, it's a notion that will inevitably be sidelined by the game's focus on pummelling large numbers of enemies into the dirt. Of course, it's pointless to get irate at the appropriation of great ideas and stories for use in media that do not express those ideas or stories well – it happens too often, for one thing. Secondly, a game such as *Beowulf* doesn't necessarily need to excel at anything other than visceral carnage – and why should it? Nonetheless, there's a faint waft of defeatism when Matouba says, "In the movie, Beowulf fights just three different monsters and you cannot make a game with that." Perhaps it'd be truer to say you can't make a hack-and-slash game with that material; there are other, more challenging, complex game ideas that could be drawn from the story, that are maybe less reductive.

A mistake that games based on film licences make continuously is trying to reproduce just the action of a film, and invariably paling by comparison. Ubisoft has a huge advantage over most attempts; the team behind *Beowulf* has already proven its ability to create brilliant action titles with *GRAW*, and, hopefully, the decision to move outside of the film's remit will actually expand their scope for contributing something valuable to the tale.



The survival of your thanes is central to your success; in this instance you need their manpower to roll the huge stone to block the entry of further enemies. To this end, when one is in need of help, an indicator will direct you to their position

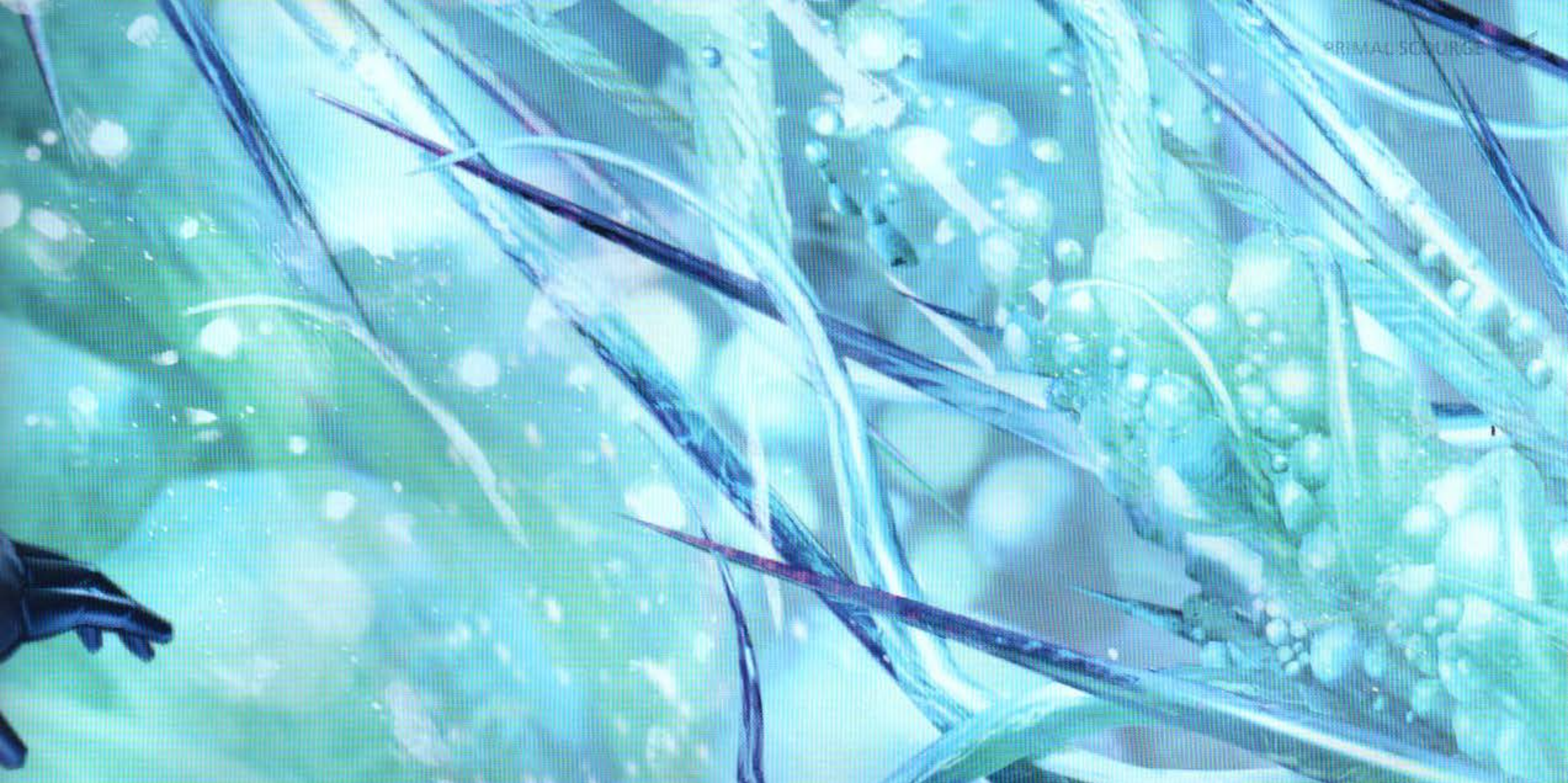






The repetition of hacking and slashing is broken by vicious finishing moves


PRIMAL



SCOURGE

METROID MEETS REMOTE. BUT WILL SAMUS' NEW ADVENTURE REINVENT MORE THAN JUST THE WAY YOU CONTROL HER?

As one of the few Nintendo Wii 'hardcore' games, *Metroid Prime 3* has a lot riding on its shoulders. It has to provide the deep, twisting singleplayer experience that exemplifies the series. And it has to demonstrate how the hardware's controls can be used for more than a spot of light tennis or stir-frying: namely the tight demands of an FPS.

TITLE: **METROID PRIME 3: CORRUPTION**
FORMAT: **Wii**
PUBLISHER: **NINTENDO**
DEVELOPER: **RETRO STUDIOS**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **2007**

Metroid Prime 3 certainly accomplishes the latter. In fact, the control system has a responsiveness and accuracy that no other console FPS has possessed. Looking with the Wii Remote and moving with the Nunchuck, it's fluid and precise, and feels very much like a mouse and keyboard setup. The effect is especially apparent when using the highest of the game's three control sensitivities, which removes the deadzone between changing aim and the camera following the move.

The result of this considerable achievement is that for all that *Metroid Prime 3* visually and structurally resembles its two predecessors it's a subtly different game. The contrast is implicit from the start – the game begins with a catsuited Samus in the cockpit of her ship before she applies her iconic suit. The action switches to firstperson with an introduction to one of the game's new features, a context-sensitive Wii Remote-enabled button pressing and fiddling system. The cockpit is studded with controls and things to play around with – handles that must be twisted to line up moving symbols for 'suit calibration', navigation systems to be activated, and engines to be engaged with a press of her finger. It teaches some of the depth with which



This boss is made vulnerable by grappling its armour open to expose its core. The ease of triggering the grapple move ensures that the battle flows smoothly despite the complexity of the other actions necessary for success









Retro Studios has applied Wii Remote functionality, and enacting the behaviour of Samus' hand adds new consistency to the experience of interacting with her environment.

Another difference is apparent when the ship turns around from its position facing empty space to discover a Galactic Federation fleet. For in *Metroid Prime 3*, Samus is no longer alone. The entire first section is taken up with a tour around the fleet's capital ship, complete with interactive NPCs and three other bounty hunters. For those familiar with the series' peculiar sense of isolation, it's a strange experience. As much as it adds flesh to Samus'

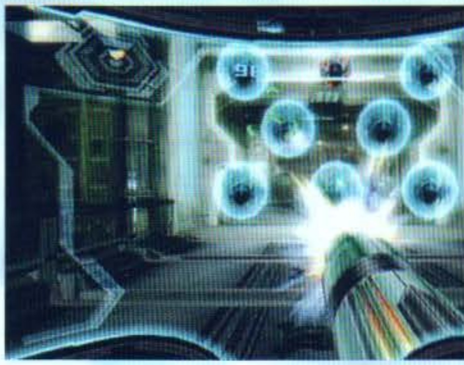
You see a capital ship cut in two like a scene from Star Wars, nothing like anything seen in a previous Metroid

story – her identity as a single-minded bounty hunter and her relationship with other humans – it also removes some of what gives *Metroid* its distinctive air.

Instead of the previous *Primes*' quiet drip-feed discovery of their backstories, *MP3*'s introductory section uses overt exposition through cutscenes, dialogue and minimal scanning, to communicate its relatively complex scenario. It seems a virus has infected several of the Galactic Federation's organic AIs, so Samus and the other bounty hunters need to deliver a vaccine to them. But the explanation is cut short by a Space Pirate attack. Running to the bridge, you see a capital ship cut in two by an energy beam, fighters dashing all around like a scene from Star Wars, and certainly nothing like anything seen in a previous *Metroid*.

A tightly scripted sequence follows as you fight your way through boarding Space Pirates to your ship, with fighters crashing into passageways and NPCs putting up clockwork defences against the onslaught. The excellent control system beds in, and you can consider a series of thoughtful options. Apart from setting the deadzone between aiming and camera movement, you

Samus' ship plays much more of a part in *MP3* than in previous *Prime* games, due to the Command Visor. What it will add to the game is debatable







This boss, the first in the game, is toweringly intimidating, but its large glowing weak points provide ample clues as to how to defeat it. It's also one of the first times the game demands careful aiming and dodging

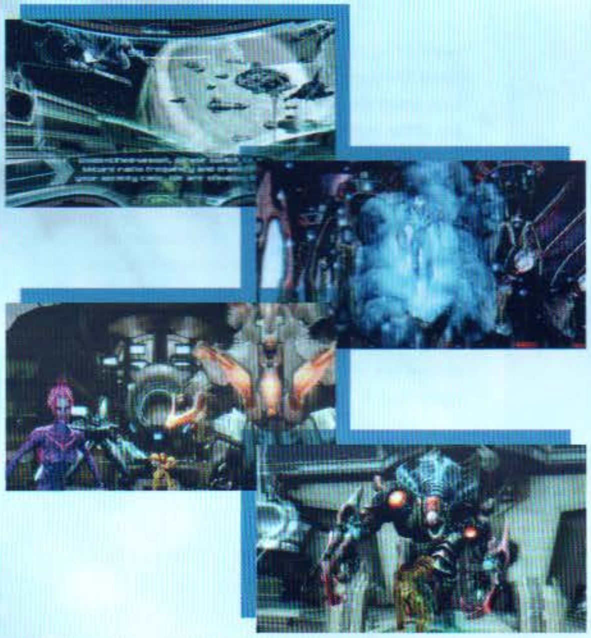
can also choose lock-on types – locking on will either fix aim directly on the target or fix the camera on the target and allow free aiming around it. The flexibility the system affords is borne out by being able to play an ad-hoc keepy-uppy game by shooting objects on the floor in the hangar where Samus leaves her ship at the game's outset, a pursuit that's hard to imagine in any other console FPS.

Following a boss fight against a large Space Pirate berserker, the action follows Samus down to the surface of Norion, a planet that's also under attack and the site of more traditional *Metroid Prime* play: solitary exploration of the embattled installation. Apart that is from the involvement of her fellow bounty hunters, who continually cross her path and help her accomplish her task of activating three power cores to power up a giant gun. Each of them is characterised by a specific skill and they broadly resemble the hunters found in *Metroid Prime: Hunters* on DS – one is able to mimic other life forms, there's a cybernetic type that rides a giant robot, and another that can freeze enemies and ride an ice slide through the air.

The section is something of a rollercoaster ride. There's the epic battle with Ridley seen in last year's E3 demo, which takes place while falling down a shaft toward the molten core of the planet. A fight between the cybernetic bounty hunter's mount and a similarly sized Berserker Pirate. A phazon-encrusted meteor that materialises in space and sets out on a collision course for the planet. And the reappearance of *Metroid Prime 2*'s Dark Samus, who manages to take out all four bounty hunters with some sort of corrupting phazon-powered weapon that seems likely to mean they will be returning as bosses later in the game.

The section also imbues Samus with her first suit enhancement – the grapple beam. Seen in last year's demo, it allows Samus to wrench objects from their fixings and is activated by locking on to an appropriate target, throwing out the Nunchuck and pulling back. It's a fantastically physical feature that lends further sense of involvement in the environment, even if its application can be inconsistent. Only specific objects and enemies can be successfully grappled – a Space Pirate's shield, for instance, or a pile of debris, all denoted by a special icon. Its use in battles is therefore enjoyable, even if it does less to add new tactical depth than just add more to do.

Samus also uses one of her new tools, the Command Visor, which allows limited control



From top: The view of the space fleet you see at the game's outset; the emergence of Dark Samus, the game's main nemesis; Samus' fellow bounty hunters just before being splattered by Dark Samus' mysterious phazon-based attack; and the introduction of the game's first boss



One of *MP3*'s target-shooting challenges, a grid of enemies that slowly advances towards you (left). One by one, the enemies briefly drop shields to fire, giving you the opportunity to destroy them. In an early set-piece, three Space Pirates steal a vital power core and dodge around a limited area, teaching the need to lock-on (above)



IN-CHARACTER

Further highlighting *Metroid Prime 3*'s emphasis on story and characterisation is its use of voice instead of text in cutscenes, which might not be so bad if the performances weren't so hammy. Thankfully, Samus herself remains, so far, in dignified silence. Character design of the human NPCs is slightly cartoon-like, with exaggerated motion and appearances. In line with the exposure of her body in its skin-tight suit at the game's outset, Samus' face is now continually reflected in her visor while scanning (activated by holding the '–' button and choosing from a radial menu with the Remote), her eyes following the direction in which the camera pans. The treatment contrasts with the way the previous *Prime* games would only occasionally flash her face during explosions.



Grappling a Space Pirate's shield away is tremendously satisfying. This section, set on an open platform with crates providing cover, features an extended series of attacks from various forms of your Space Pirate enemies



Visually, it's hard to see much difference between *Metroid Prime 3* and its predecessors, apart from a spot of bloom here and there, and more expansive environments. That it still frequently looks so beautiful shows how successful the series' characteristic style is

over her ship by being able to order it to fly to a restricted set of locations indicated by an icon seen through the visor. It's an exciting premise, but from its use in the early sections it seems to be little more than a glorified save and teleport device (by entering the ship and flying to previously explored locations), and a somewhat crude way of opening up areas by firing its powerful guns to create new passages.

The second section revealed is called Skytown, a beautiful Chozo structure floating in clouds. Composed of various platforms connected by rails that must be grappled to travel on, it's made from ornate rusting metalwork in golds, browns and pinks and features clockworky robots that aren't dissimilar to Star Wars: Episode One's droids. Indeed, the location and palette is rather reminiscent of a steampunk-infused Cloud City from The Empire Strikes Back, but it's also beautiful, and quite unlike any previous *Metroid Prime* setting.

Indeed, the way in which Skytown's 'rooms' are connected, often by the rail system, has a linearity that's more similar to a *Zelda* dungeon – a woven but ultimately straight path from start to end – than the usual complexity of a *Metroid* map, full of blind alleys, backtracks and crossing paths.

The rail system also underlines another aspect of *Metroid Prime 3* – an emphasis on shooting. Speeding along the rails, you need to shoot gates open in front of you and take out patterns of enemies as if playing an on-rails shooter. The Norion section includes flying enemies arranged in advancing grids that are only vulnerable to fire one at a time. The enemy count seems increased overall, with Space Pirate attacks, swarms of bugs and the battle with Ridley, which is a gruelling assault on the thumb, and they're positioned in such a way that they're less easy to bypass than in the previous games.

The decision certainly showcases the qualities of the new control system – the mini shooting tasks exploit the Wii Remote's accuracy well. If *Metroid Prime 1* and *2*'s slow, methodical focus on exploration has much to do with their atypical control system, then it's in many ways logical that Retro has allowed the Wii Remote to define the focus of *Metroid Prime 3*. Though the greater emphasis on action might be seen to take away what made its predecessors so fresh in a generation so inundated with firstperson games, the subtle way it's been implemented – organically rather than overtly set into the environments – ensures that it still feels true to its lineage.

In fact, where *Metroid Prime 3* seems to diverge from the *Prime* format the most is in its new 'epic' feel. Its story is bumped up and made more explicit, and there's a much greater sense of the universe around Samus. Battles rage around her and other bounty hunters prove themselves to be as lethally capable as she is: not only is she no longer alone, but she's no longer the alpha female. The danger is that the subtle myth and mystery that did so much to drive progression through *Metroid Prime 3*'s predecessors will be eroded.

Hopefully, the later game will recapture some of the heavy, lonely atmosphere that the early sections seem to lack. It would certainly be a shame for this game, one that has clearly had such intelligent and careful attention lavished upon its exemplary control system, to end up becoming more like something its adventuring forebears were always at such pains to avoid – just another story-based shooter. The early game proves one thing we always suspected, however: the Wii Remote can provide one of the best firstperson control systems around.



SHE'S GOT MOTION

Retro Studios has managed to infuse *Metroid Prime 3* with many small Remote-enabled motion-based features. Locking on to switches causes Samus' hand to appear, index finger ready to press buttons. It moves in accordance with the Remote.

Some switches are activated with a more complex pull, turn and push manoeuvre with the Remote, but in reality the move is achieved more by luck than skill. Because it demands a similar motion to grappling, which is activated with the Nunchuck, it can feel slightly odd having to perform the moves with the Remote. The Nunchuck, however, can't detect the necessary twisting motion, perhaps an illustration of some of the challenges Retro has had in mapping controls to the Wii hardware.







Morphball exploration of conveniently sized tubes returns in *MP3*. Skytown features some gloriously patterned textures that set the environment apart from its obvious inspirations



Where Metroid Prime 3 seems to diverge from the Prime format the most is in its new 'epic' feel











The winding rail system (left) that you use to travel between locations in Skytown features fast-paced shooting of gates and enemies to avoid being knocked off, though it only costs a small health penalty to restart



BRAVE NUCLEAR





WORLD

AFTER MUCH ANTICIPATION, BETHESDA UNVEILS ITS TAKE ON THE BLOODY AND BLEAKLY AMUSING WORLD OF FALLOUT

A matter of jubilation to some, trepidation to others, Bethesda Softworks' acquisition of the violent roleplaying franchise *Fallout* back in 2004 has caused contention amongst its legions of avid fans, filling their still-thriving web communities with vitriol, fervour and wild speculation in equal parts. Finally, the fruits of Bethesda's labours have come to light, and although those dogmatically opposed to the company's involvement with their beloved series will probably never be appeased, more reasonable fans should find much to reassure them that Bethesda has diligently resurrected the spirit of *Fallout* – and, further, they should be impressed by how the developer has stayed so faithful to the past while contributing some considerable innovations.

Though easy to mock, it's also hard to begrudge the fans' preciousness about *Fallout*. It's a series that justifies its devoted following; Black Isle Studios, now defunct, created a world that placed startlingly few limitations on your interaction with it and yet, miraculously, somehow delivered depth and humour in each of your decisions. Driven by a unique art style, *Fallout* was set in an ingeniously realised vision of a post-apocalyptic America as it might have been imagined in the 1950s – an irradiated wasteland juxtaposed with the can-do jollity of the Cold War era's civil protection booklets; a World of Tomorrow optimism wittily undercut by the horror of survival in what has become a desolate and brutal world.

Fallout 3, in this respect, is faithful to its predecessors. "We've carried through all the major themes and design decisions from the previous games," says lead artist **Istvan Pely**. "Like, for example, the combination of futuristic technology



TITLE: **FALLOUT 3**
FORMAT: **360, PC, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **TBA**
DEVELOPER: **BETHESDA SOFTWORKS**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **AUTUMN 2008**



Washington DC's Metro system features heavily in the game, functioning not just as a convenient means of accessing areas of the city that are too dangerous to reach overground, but also as an ersatz dungeon-crawl

with a 1950s vibe; every car is nuclear powered, but there's a strong retro quality to them."

Bethesda seems to have fully understood the appeal of that world's grim humour, and naturally the iconic mascot of the series, Vault Boy, returns to prominence. He is a parody of the false optimism that typified the US government's thermonuclear war survival handbooks of the 1940s and '50s – winking and smiling while wrapping the irradiated corpse of a close family member in polythene. In the world of *Fallout* he is the cartoon figure of encouragement adorning the instructional brochures that accompany the lucky few down to the Vaults – self-sustaining communities sunk deep into the earth, beyond the reach of radiation.

"We've definitely come to love Vault Boy," says **Todd Howard**, the game's executive producer. "The whole world's blown up and you get Vault Boy giving the thumbs-up. I think there's a big chuckle factor in that. The humour in the game is something we talked about; how we could use it without being silly. A lot of *Fallout*'s humour is very ironic."

And it's Fallout, in preference to *Fallout 2*, that has been the model for the new game – with Howard asserting that the latter's humour erred towards the crass, bombarding the player with edgy content in a way that sometimes felt forced. "*Fallout 3* is set 30 years after the events of *Fallout 2*, but the first *Fallout* is our tone setting for the game," says Howard. "As far as *Fallout: Tactics* and *Brotherhood Of Steel* go, we tend to ignore them in much the same way I prefer to ignore Alien 3 and 4."

Whilst Bethesda has drawn a great deal from the first two games of the series, it's been necessary to expand upon that vision. "We stayed very true to the flavour of the original game, but where there were blanks we filled them in with our own details and desires – just by extrapolating," says Pely. "The original game, whilst innovative for its time, only had a few pixels dedicated to any one asset, so when you're fleshing that out for high definition, there's a lot of opportunity to put our own twist on it. With the technology now we can go to such greater levels of detail and a higher level of realism – I wouldn't say photorealistic – more like a hyper-realistic density. It gives us a lot of freedom to interpret what the world would look like."

However, where Bethesda has dared to go further than *Fallout 3*'s predecessors, it has nonetheless stayed true to the series' tone. As you venture beyond the cloying safety of the vault and explore the blasted wasteland, your Pip-Boy 3000, an arm-mounted PDA, picks up radio signals. Occasionally you'll hear odd bursts of chatter which will give you information or tip you off to potential missions, but by and large you'll hear the local radio stations' selection of '40s music – 20 songs have been licensed from that era. Accompanying your violent escapades in a desolate, brutalised landscape with the lulling sounds of jazz is a juxtaposition that evokes the spirit of those earlier games perfectly.

The brutalised landscape in question, however, is not precisely as it was in previous titles – the new instalment sees the setting shift from one side of the US to the other: "It's still a wasteland," says Pely. "But it's not a west USA desert, it's how the wasteland would look like on the east coast and the Washington DC urban area."

The environment has been generated with great

ASSISTED AGRESSION



Whether or not Bethesda would choose to stay true to the first two games' turn-based combat has been a matter of vigorous speculation. "I think the biggest question about the game is what we are doing in relation to combining guns and roleplaying," says Howard. Bethesda's answer is elegant. The Vault-Tec Assisted Targeting System allows the player to pause the game at any point, cycle through possible targets, and queue up shots, balancing the number of action points you have against those required by each weapon. Equally, you can play the entire game like a firstperson shooter, although the VATS system gives you a degree of control that many of the more frantic fire-fights will require.





Conversations are determined, to some extent, by your skillset. Branching dialogue trees return, but some of their options are appended by a percentage, indicating your chance of success with such an approach. Of course, if you are trying to intimidate someone, it might help to beef up a little, dropping some points on to your strength stat. Alternately, working on your charisma might help you talk people round to your point of view





Though Bethesda opted to ditch the isometric view of the first game, *Fallout 3* has the option to leave firstperson and use a highly flexible thirdperson camera, which allows you to position the view almost wherever you please

fidelity – not to the extent that every street of Washington DC is recreated; Howard is keen that the design serves the gameplay rather than function as an in-joke for people familiar with the city. "With Washington DC, there are buildings which aren't in the game and we've added sci-fi touches, but we want the world to feel very, very real," he says. "Even though it's this comic-book pulpy thing we are really anal about this. What would the wasteland around Washington DC look like? How would people live and survive here? What would people wear to live underground?"

This vision has no doubt been informed by the concept art of the exceptionally talented Craig Mullins, whose bleak vistas were recently seen as teaser artwork in the build-up to the game's unveiling, but actually created much earlier, during pre-production. "It was some of the first art we had done for the game," says Pely. "Its primary purpose was for us, to inspire us, and help us find a direction for the game. There's a shot of the Capitol Building with the dome busted – this is our icon, this is what we're going for, this is the kind of flavour we're going to give to our environments. Hopefully the game itself reflects the same level of destruction, detail and quality. Even the colour palettes follow through.

"We had a lengthy pre-production, so we spent a lot of time drawing and designing things. In-house we have our own brilliant and super-fast concept artist, Adam Adamowicz, who goes through hundreds and hundreds of drawings. When we asked him to design the Pip-Boy, I think he went through something like 20 or 30 iterations until it was perfect."



"THE CHARACTER SYSTEM IS 100 PER CENT DIFFERENT FROM OBLIVION'S; THE GAME HAS A VERY DIFFERENT FLOW"

Of course, regardless of Bethesda's intense efforts in recreating the look and feel of *Fallout*, there will always be those rabid detractors who claim that it is no more than *Oblivion* with guns and giant mutant scorpions. The nature of both games inevitably means that there is considerable crossover in their design ethos.

"*Fallout 1* was the kind of game we really loved," says Howard. "It's more or less a wide-open game. It's what we try to do in our games. If you look at *Oblivion* versus *Fallout*, the big things they do – allowing you to make this character and go into a world and do what you want – they're the same. We're not going to change that. It works well. But when you sit down and play *Fallout 3*, the character system is 100 per cent different from *Oblivion*'s; how you level up, how your skills interact, they're both very, very different. The game has a very different flow to *Oblivion*."

In fact, the comparatively smaller scale of *Fallout 3* determines that it will necessarily feel significantly different. Though it may be no more linear than *Oblivion*, its world is smaller, its people fewer, its depiction more focused and intently crafted. From the art perspective, this means that there's no procedural generation of terrain, as Pely explains: "It's all done by hand. Throughout the whole world there won't be a square foot that won't be touched by an artist. But although *Fallout 3* is a lot denser than *Oblivion*, its world is still pretty big. It doesn't feel like any less work than the previous game, that's for sure. But though it's a huge undertaking, from my perspective, I find it liberating because we can spend that much more time polishing every little detail."

Such narrowing of focus also helps to mitigate many of *Oblivion*'s failings. In a world as huge as Cyrodiil, it was inevitable that much of it would feel



somewhat bland – a criticism directed particularly at its characters and dialogue.

"I think oftentimes the scale of our *Elder Scrolls* stuff gets in its way," says Howard. "Where people compare our content to something they see in another game that is smaller and more focused. But a lot of the problems you get having 1,000 to 2,000 characters go away in a smaller game."

Whereas *Oblivion*'s entire populace was voiced by a tiny cadre of actors, *Fallout 3* uses 30 to 40 actors for the few hundred characters that populate its world. "We really don't have very much of that generic dialogue," says Howard. "In *Oblivion* you're writing for a thousand people – so every line is very flat, you don't add a lot of character to it because you don't know which character is going to say it. In *Fallout 3*, almost every line is specific for a character and so you can bring in a voice actor and say, this is who you're playing, this is their attitude, this is why you're responding in this way. It makes a world of difference."

Oblivion's randomly generated dialogue between NPCs was also the source of some derision – often producing garbled and stilted conversations about mudcrabs that made little sense in the context of a demonic invasion. **Emil Pagliarulo**, the man responsible for *Oblivion*'s justly lauded Dark Brotherhood section, is keen to emphasise how the smaller number of characters has allowed for a greater personalisation in this respect.

"We've done a much better job of making the



Megaton goes pop, leaving nothing but an irradiated hole in the ground that is best avoided; your exposure to radiation is something you have watch carefully. Many sources of water will also be contaminated

dialogue between characters more believable," Pagliarulo says. "So for example the sheriff has a son, and if you were to follow him when he goes home and listen to him talk to his son, the dialogue he has is specifically tailored to that relationship."

Probably the most significant difference in scale between *Oblivion* and *Fallout 3* is not in the size of its world, or the number of characters in it, but in the simple fact that the game actually ends.

"If you follow the main quest there's going to be a point where it's pretty clear that this is the end of the game," says Howard. "The way we're doing it, it needs to end, and it feels very good. But it's still a game where you can wander the wasteland and kill creatures, and find holes and buildings to go in and try to level up and get power and go to cities and d all of those things. But because you can't pick all of the character traits on one playthrough you might start over – you might play it for 20 hours and then try a different character, but you'll probably have done a few of the main quests."

The team estimates that the average time to completion will be about 40 hours, with half of that time spent on the main quest itself. The repercussions of this design decision are huge and possibly the greatest reason for excitement about

"THE WAY WE'RE DOING IT, IT NEEDS TO END, AND IT FEELS GOOD. BUT IT'S STILL A GAME WHERE YOU CAN WANDER"

the game – *Fallout 3* demands replay, not simply because the character you play is superficially different in its capabilities, but because the game offers a plethora of choices that significantly alter the game experience each time.

"A lot of people's experiences in *Oblivion* are different only in the order they do things, not in their actual nature," says Howard.

"You are the everyman in *Oblivion*," agrees Pagliarulo. "You can do everything in the world. It's very different in *Fallout* because of the choices you make. Depending on your actions, certain paths are closed to you, so you can't cover everything the wa *Oblivion* does in one session."

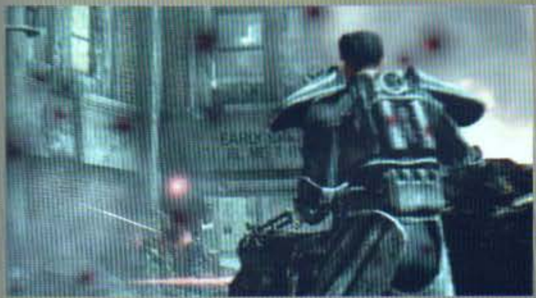
That Bethesda is accommodating dramaticall different replays of the game is confirmed by the fact that *Fallout 3* will feature between nine and 12 possible endings – some of which will be rooted in decisions significantly earlier in the game.

"When we did the main quests in *Elder Scrolls*, we knew that you could keep playing," says Howar "There were certain things we couldn't do with the

"The facial system we used in *Oblivion* was newly developed," says Pely. "Now we can take it much further. *Fallout 3* is very much a character-driven game so it's really important that we focused on increasing their realism"









"*Oblivion* was our first time trying out a lot of new concepts and technology on next-generation platforms and cutting edge PCs," says Howard. "The second time around, we feel we can make some pretty big jumps"

endings because there might have been a lot that was still going on – so maybe the endings got nerfed a little bit. With *Fallout* we wanted to have the consequences of your decisions have a lot more balls to them. You don't really curse the decisions you made ten hours ago when you play *Oblivion*, but with *Fallout* you get that every hour."

An example of such a decision with "a lot more balls" would be the detonation of an entire town. Fresh out of the Vault, your character stumbles upon Megaton, a settlement clustered in the crater of an unexploded nuke, its inhabitants having grown to revere the bomb as a sacred object. It is no less significant a place than the cities of *Oblivion* – and yet, should you choose to accept a mission from a shady character you meet in one of the bars, you can blow the entire place from the face of the earth, attaching an explosive to the nuke's underbelly and then activating it from a safe distance.

The branching paths of any RPG are always rooted in the character creation system, and *Fallout 3* has one that, while remaining true to the trait selection of previous games, should prove to be more organic. Spread across the first hour of the game, your character creation is integrated into your early life in the cloistered confines of Vault 101, flashing through periods between birth and adulthood. The first thing you do as a player is to pick your appearance, and immediately after your troublesome birth your father removes his mask to reveal that he shares many of those same features. At a later point, he gives you a children's book, entitled 'You're Special!' via which you balance your seven primary attributes (conforming to the SPECIAL system familiar to fans of the series), and later still you are subjected to the Generalised Occupational Aptitude Test, defining your skill-set further.

Traits, the small selection of extreme character quirks that lend your creation greater idiosyncrasy will return – and it was strongly suggested that these would include the popular Bloody Mess trait, ensuring that your enemies expire in the most gruesome manner possible. Bethesda no doubt has other grisly tricks up its sleeve, although Howard chose to remain coy about the meaning of one loading screen, which detailed statistics on the number of corpses that the player had eaten.

"People forget that *Fallout* was one of the first games that really shocked," says Howard. "It was like a dip switch for violence. And, let's all just own up to it, violence done well is just fucking hilarious."

Certainly this is a sentiment apparent in the selection of *Fallout 3*'s arsenal, which features, among other comic-book horrors, a hand-held nuclear rocket launcher. "One cool feature in the game is you can make your own weapons," says Howard, explaining how you can deconstruct existing weapons and recombine their parts to create something new. He offers examples: a home-made flak cannon, which shoots rocks and other useless junk, and a shrapnel bomb comprised of a lunchbox filled with explosives and bottle-tops.

The flipside to the modifiable weapons is that each component degrades, affecting the stats of the weapon: its spread, reliability and rate of fire all change over time, whilst your own skills determine the steadiness of your aim and control of the weapon. It makes combat a more considered process than in most firstperson shooters, complemented by Bethesda's ingenious implementation of an optional feature, known as VATS, which allows the player to switch between visceral gunplay and turn-based tactics at their leisure (see 'Assisted aggression').

Such a tactical combat system offers a fundamental departure from the style of play made familiar to us by *Oblivion*, and underscores the fact that Bethesda is quite assuredly making a *Fallout* game, rather than a sci-fi *Elder Scrolls*. Yet the brilliant touch, one which makes it apparent that Bethesda and the *Fallout* franchise deserve one another, is that the use of it comes down to player choice. It is this, as much as the Vault Boy or the post-apocalyptic wilderness, which defines *Fallout*, and Bethesda's cognisance of *Oblivion*'s sometimes unwieldy scale suggests that the team will deliver a game as rich in choice and imagination as its wasteland is desolate.

ON THE LEVEL



A common complaint about *Oblivion* was the way in which your foes' abilities escalated in tandem with your own, creating bizarre situations in which mere bandits were equipped with the finest enchanted armour.

"A creature is a creature is our motto for *Fallout*," says Howard. "He's going to have the same health at level one as he does when you're level 20. There are a few areas where you get locked in, and those areas balance more for your level – you need to be able to survive it and not have to step back to an old save game."

Once an area has been adjusted to your level, however, it remains in that state. "If you leave and come back at a higher level, it's ass-whooping time," laughs Howard. "There's still an element of level adjustment, but we're never on the same scale as *Oblivion*."





Finishing the fight

We visit Bungie to take a close look at what Microsoft says will be 'bigger than any movie launch in history'

TITLE: **HALO 3**
FORMAT: **360**
PUBLISHER: **MICROSOFT**
DEVELOPER: **BUNGIE STUDIOS**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **SEPTEMBER**

It starts in a dark bunker with the rallying cries of an officer. The space flickers with the beams from our fellow soldiers' rifle-mounted flashlights, bringing out a dull gleam on the parked Warthogs in the shadows. Marines bellow bullish whoops before we mount up and proceed up a wide rough-hewn tunnel, intermittently lit by a chain of reddish floodlights.

This may not be the first level of *Halo 3*'s campaign, but it is early on. It seems an appropriate place to continue the adventure, given the ambiguous ending of *Halo 2*. The Covenant is splintered by civil war and Earth is under full attack from the remainder of its forces. Cortana has been captured by the mysterious Gravemind and Master Chief has announced his intention of "finishing this fight." But right now, in this grittily inauspicious bunker, all those plot complexities are moot. We're on reassuring terra firma, and allies are all around.

The game is taking place in the similarly dark, over-air-conditioned boardroom of Bungie's Seattle studio, which is a similarly inauspicious bunker-like building. A clutch of journalists from around the world are sitting ready, their faces illuminated by bright, new, LCD TVs. Behind them stand



Bungie staff, arms folded and pensive. This is the first time anyone outside of Bungie and Microsoft has seen the singleplayer focus of the game, the last part of a console-defining trilogy that began six years ago.

One by one, the screens brighten still further. Players are reaching the top of the tunnel. Before us spreads wide savannah under blue skies. Grunts flee before our thundering tyres, up a gentle incline scattered with low trees and rocky outcrops. This is Silent Highway, the third level in *Halo 3*'s campaign. It's a triumphant re-envisioning of Silent Cartographer's



Silent Highway is a re-envisioning of Silent Cartographer's beach landing – a thrilling chase across open ground with fellow soldiers

dropship beach landing – a thrilling chase across open ground alongside your victory-hungry fellow soldiers.

And before we know it, we're back in the familiar instinctive, free-flowing combat that makes the *Halo* series so distinct among firstperson shooters. But though it feels familiar, it's not the same. The environments are more expansive than ever before, and they're spanned by fighting enemies and allied forces. Tens of Brutes and Grunts bearing varieties of armour and weaponry are visible and active at any one time, attacking both you and your fellow marines. The scale is immediately evident, and remarkable.

Naturalising something only smoke and mirrors managed to achieve in its forebears has subtly changed *Halo 3*'s battlefield. "In *Halo 1* and *2* you'd have to spawn a load of guys at the front, and once the player has killed those guys, you'd spawn some guys behind a rock and so the entire battle would sort of play out the same way," says **Jaime Greisemer**, *Halo 3*'s sandbox design lead, the man behind the new weapons and equipment, damage systems and AI behaviours. "But now we spawn a whole battlefield full of guys and have fun. If you want to engage these guys right up front, you can. If you want to stand up on a ridge, they'll start shooting back."

The result is a lot more variety. Encounters have even greater fluidity than before, organically ebbing and flowing with your actions. It's common to push forward too quickly and find yourself attacked from all sides, so apart from managing your weaponry, it's now important to tactically manage your troops. It's often wise to hang back and give support, allowing them to clean up less powerful enemies, and protect them by carefully taking out threats. In the same spirit, AI is the same, but more. A new group dynamic means leaders will audibly give their troops orders, such as to throw grenades, and they will, in an alarming barrage. Meanwhile, your troops interact with the environment with new sophistication. They'll hop over debris on the ground or kick it out of the way, and they'll open doors if you're in a vehicle.

The action flows through gullies, over hills, through installations and past crash sites, following the path of a raised highway. There's plenty of opportunity to explore the environment away from that central stream, too. There are wide vistas looking out over a precipice toward the Covenant excavation site (the vast crater seen in the first game trailer), and exploration is rewarded by extra dialogue and musical cues, plus the sight of a distant aerial conflict against the swirling cloudscape.

The highway is frequently broken. Shattered sections of road have fallen at angles into the landscape, forming spectacular crescents of mangled concrete against the sky. Such scenes show off the lighting engine: golden sun catches surfaces with subtle shine and contrasts with delicate pools of shadow. It's easy to see that, visually, *Halo 3* is a much closer expression of what Bungie's vision was for its predecessors, without departing in style from them one bit. It has far more detail – the highway is littered with crashed cars and debris, and there's a lot more textural variety in worn human-made objects, lustrous natural features, and vivid Covenant war materiel. Bungie's content manager, **Frank O'Connor**, later claims that the in-game graphics now closely resemble the original concept paintings. "I

Bouncing back

Unsurprisingly, Bungie won't be drawn on what lies in store for the studio after *Halo 3*, but O'Connor is candid enough to say that it will by no means be shutting down once it has shipped. "*Halo* is a game that will benefit from, say, downloadable content," he begins carefully. "We'll make an announcement about what's next. Project or projects – we're a big enough studio that we can handle more than one thing. It's a creative place. People will be working on little skunkworks projects that might not come to fruition. Who knows, you might see a *Lumines* or *Bubble Bobble* from Bungie one day, maybe a Live Arcade title, but we're certainly set up as a big-ticket studio and that's what you'll see from us over the next few years."



















The two levels we played centred on vehicular combat, which the newly expansive environments show off to great effect. The old AI dynamic whereby killing a squad's leader sends Grunts into panicked disarray returns with a caveat – just sometimes a Grunt will go crazy and run at you, two primed grenades in its hands



always think our games have something of a painterly quality because they're not photorealistic," he says. "It's a little risky because people, say, expect cars to look like the cars from *Forza*, but I think we've fulfilled our original vision, graphically at least."

As an introduction to vehicles for newcomers, Silent Highway's path steadily progresses from the Warthog charge at its outset to vehicle-to-vehicle combat against Brute Choppers, noisy, ugly motorbike-like vehicles with twin machine guns and enormous, appropriately brutal, front wheels that turn out to be good for mowing down anything in front of them. And then, during a subtly enforced on-foot section, it introduces a series of Wraiths that must be destroyed. They have been slightly tweaked from the previous games with a more explicit weak point – an exhaust port on the rear with a cover. Two melee hits and they will blow – if you can get in close enough.

And so the level ends. There's a palpable sense of relief from the crowded Bungie staff. "For the designers it's the first time they've seen people outside of the lab rats playing through," says community and franchise lead **Brian Jarrad**. He explains that the dev team had even been working on it earlier that very morning, a fact confirmed by the





Brutes' earthy tribal nature has provided Bungie with a wide range of stylistic details that transcend the colour coding that differentiated the Elites in *Halo 1* and *2*



Gag reflex

The new level of detail in the environments tells quiet stories about the Covenant, the battle on Earth and the Forerunners. Oh, and it has a line in studio in-jokes, too. We saw on the ground in one area a poster reading 'MISSING – JASON JONES', complete with picture and readable text – Jones being Bungie's elusive co-founder. According to Marty O'Donnell, *Halo*'s sound lead and composer of its score, it was a barb aimed at Jones going on two holidays during a busy development period. Detail extends to its soundscape, too – of the 53,595 pieces of audio created by the day we visited, 39,368 were of NPC dialogue. The clip we heard of a Brute mourning the death of his fellow with a shout of "He was my lover" will apparently be given a one-in-10,000 chance of being heard.



build date on the software we see on the menu screens. "It's a relief it's all working," he admits.

We take a minute with O'Connor in the studio's lobby, and he explains that the morning has been terrifying. "It's hard to explain to some of the guys here, but one of the processes of making a game is revealing it, and it's stressful," he says. "We've lost perspective, I think, on how it looks and how it plays. Multiplayer's fine – everyone's confident about that. But the campaign in many ways has the most to live up to and prove." Why's that? "I think because of *Halo 2*'s campaign, the fact it finished on a cliffhanger, the fact we didn't have time to do all the things we wanted to do. We certainly didn't have time to do all the testing and polish. This time around we've had all the time we needed."



Despite Microsoft's claims for the size of *Halo 3*'s worldwide launch, and the forthcoming multimedia assault of publicity that it hopes will sell its console, O'Connor is adamant that the pressure on Bungie is from within. "Microsoft appreciates what we do and trusts us to do it," he says. "They don't ever come here to mandate and construct, just to learn and enjoy what we're doing. And they give us the tools, flexibility and freedom to do that. The only thing they communicate is: 'You tell us when you think you can ship the game, and stick to it'. They would have liked it to have been ready for the 360 launch or its first year, but they understand it's a big undertaking and that it's unrealistic to demand that. The pressure is creative and internal."

The second level follows on from the first. The Storm is set in the Kenyan town of Voi, and features a range of industrial environments with views of Kilimanjaro in the distance. The carefully segmented sections – confined interiors through to enormous courtyards and large warehouses – offer a good variety between close fighting and open warfare, and can be approached equally well on foot and by vehicle. The level's designer, **Niles**



These three screens show Forge, *Halo 3*'s collaborative map editing mode. Yes, it's possible to drop the Scorpion on that Spartan to kill him (top). Yes, it's possible to shoot and destroy players in editing mode (above). The potential for play is dizzying

"The Storm is more of a true sandbox experience. You can play it many different times in many different ways"

Sankey, describes it as a 'pure *Halo* sandbox'. "It's more of a true sandbox experience, where instead of going through each cell in a linear fashion you can play it many different times and in many different ways," he says.

Contributing to the variety is the addition of *Halo 3*'s equipment, elements of which were seen in the multiplayer beta. The bubble shield and power drainer will be familiar, but the flare won't. Our first encounter with it arrives after climbing a set of stairs in a facility entrance hall to find three Brutes standing in a wider corridor. Suddenly the screen goes completely white, and we back away and fire wildly in panic. Vision returns a few seconds later, and we're miraculously unharmed, back on familiar fighting ground again.

Equipment doesn't work on the same level as Bungie's 'golden tripod' – the gun, grenade and melee attacks



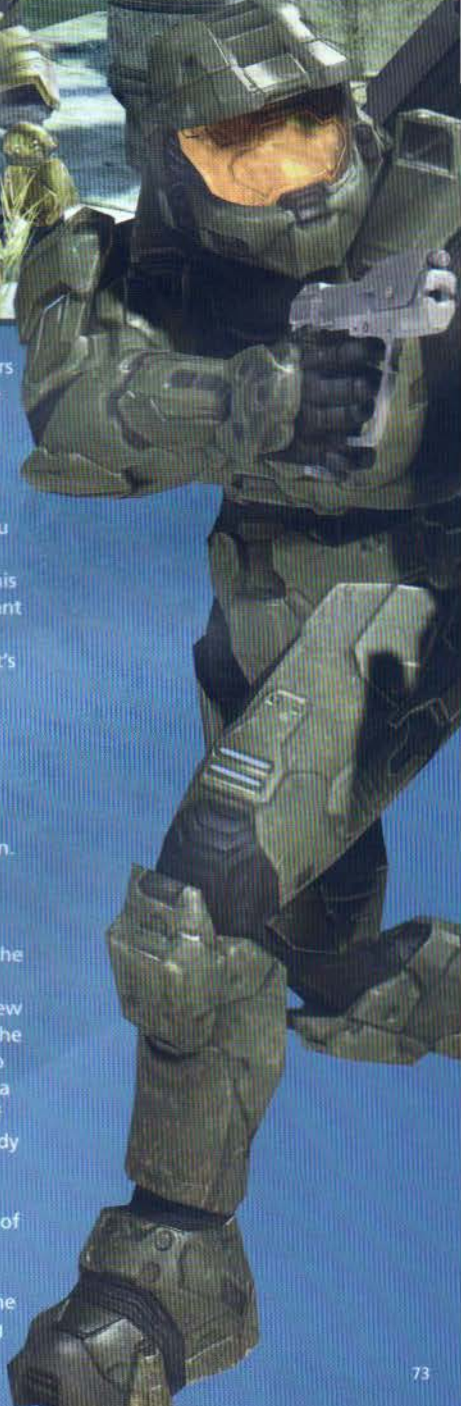


Owning avatars

Halo 3 will offer deeper customisation of multiplayer avatars than was available in *Halo 2*, with a variety of helmet, body and shoulder armour choices. Master Chief's classic Mjolnir set will be available, plus new CQB (Close Quarters Battle) and EVA (Extra Vehicular Activity) sets. Players can also choose three suit colours. The Elite model has been tweaked to make it more fair to play as – the head is smaller (to make headshots an equal challenge to pull off) and the profile less immediately noticeable in the distance. With the Arbiter closely allied with Master Chief (player two in co-op takes his role), perhaps multiplayer Elite players won't get quite so picked on in *Halo 3*.



Though already vibrantly detailed, the art isn't yet locked down and will apparently be further polished



that are always available to the player. Instead, it operates over and above normal combat, suddenly enforcing a temporary change of approach that can benefit and disadvantage each side in equal measure. The bubble shield might offer cover against fire, but it's suddenly blocking any chance you had of taking out that Brute Chieftain you've just noticed. And the power drainer will take out your shields as effortlessly as it does your foes'.

During a quick break, Greisemer describes equipment as 'tilting' the battlefield briefly. It's part of a subtle new design approach to *Halo 3*'s combat. "The 30 seconds of fun has become 30 seconds of fun and five of total astonishment," he says. "So you'll be playing and suddenly some guy will throw a flare and you'll be totally blinded, and you know somebody will charge in with a hammer and you'll totally panic. And then the flare goes away and you go back to dodging and shooting. Almost everything we've added is orthogonal to the rest of the game like this – surprises and changes to the rules, layered on top of the combat."

Later, he asks: "Have you got to the Scarab yet?" Re-entering the room we see a crowd of Bungie staff around one of the journalists. On his screen towers a vast spider-legged enemy, the same as the one found stalking through Mombassa in *Halo 2*. "It's the biggest character we've ever done," says Greisemer, explaining that there's a multitude of ways to take it out. "You fight with all the tools you have." Unlike the scripted *Halo 2* original, this Scarab is AI-controlled. "We don't want to do boss battles – it's just another part of the sandbox," he continues. It's hard not to think of the Scarab as a boss, but it's certainly a more open-ended, large-scale foe than the term usually refers to.

The staff want to see how people who haven't experienced the Scarab before will go about bringing it down. The player dashes back to a high gallery that runs along the back perimeter wall. There are mounted ground-to-air missile turrets here, so he jumps on to one and finds he can target the Scarab's legs, and with a few shots, they buckle and collapse. But the ammo expires before he's finished, so he runs back down into the main area to man a Warthog turret to finish off the remaining limbs. The heaving body crashes down, close enough to the ground that he can jump into its interior, and inside he finds a couple of Brutes and a fusion core, ripe for a couple of grenades to finally end it.

Apart from the spectacle, the scene is distinctive for its power at showing


The bubble shield, seen here, doesn't only add spice to multiplayer. The fact that equipment works equally well in campaign as it does multiplayer is testament to the adaptive and free-ranging play its AI generates and supports



Outside the map

An ARG called Iris is being run to promote the game, which plays to Bungie's obsessive attention to detail. "You'll be amazed, or horrified, how much microscopic effort goes into a mug, a T-shirt, a pose for a sticker – it's almost embarrassing," admits O'Connor. But the degree to which fans scrutinise it all for clues makes the commitment worthwhile. "Sometimes they will see something we'll never follow through on, but which was there deliberately," says O'Connor. Some of the conclusions to the ARG's seeded clues will be found in *Halo 3* itself, along with sets of whole new ones. "I'm expecting that a couple of cool payoffs will only be seen by a couple of hundred people. Hopefully they'll spread it around, but is it worth all that effort? It is, creatively, because you want the universe to be as deep and compelling as possible."



just how much of a grip the Covenant has taken on Earth. It was an intentional aim of introducing the Scarab at this point – though Sankey won't be held to confirming whether the campaign will feature more. "You can imagine what these Scarabs can do to Earth's cities," he says. In fact, there's something rather affecting about these two glimpses of *Halo 3*'s campaign. The sheer scale of action that revolves around Master Chief illustrates that this time he's part of something far more evocative than before. These early sections aren't about the cold, abstract threat of galactic apocalypse, but the more emotive idea of the explicit destruction of Earth itself, and he's not fighting it alone. Indeed, The Storm also contains non-soldier humans, workmen who will fight alongside him.

After a quick tramp out of the industrial installation and up a hill to defeat a force camped at its top, the level is over. But a sneaky glance through the build's menu options suggests that Bungie has a lot more to reveal. And, to prove the point, Jarrad asks for the lights to be dimmed once again for a demonstration of something he calls the Meta Game, a secondary way of playing the campaign. Fundamentally, it's a score system, but one supported by the use of skulls, a return of the game-rule modifying Easter eggs found in *Halo 2*. This time they're much more firmly integrated into the game. Found hidden in each area, collected skulls can be activated for new games to cause specific effects. Some will make the game harder, others just change the way it must be approached, and each will give Meta Game score bonuses.

Its main benefit will be for co-op matches – the scoring system offers a way of tracking performance in







The Hammer (above) is a version of Tartarus' weapon from *Halo 2*. Appropriately powerful, striking the ground creates shockwaves. An extended hammer-only MP session with Bungie staff after dinner proved its weighty appeal

campaign mode, awarding headshots, speed of progression and the like with extra points. Jarrad loads up a co-op game with O'Connor, who as player two is the Arbiter, on a new campaign level set at a riverside jetty in a verdant forest. The iron skull is activated, which means that if one co-op player dies, both are restarted at the latest checkpoint. "The real ultimate task will be to beat every mission in Legendary difficulty with all skulls turned on in a certain time limit with style," says Jarrad. "That'll be what people strive for, to get the highest possible score." After a little friendly fire, mostly at the cost of O'Connor, it becomes apparent that dying costs points, and killing a partner costs big points. It's a simple idea that gives new meaning and purpose to replaying, and offers new quantified detail in player achievement. Bungie is still unsure whether it will be able to include co-op play over Live – it's easy to imagine that the amount of data generated by the intensity of battlefield action might be impractically large, but the possibility is mouthwatering.

The Meta Game might look as if it will provide *Halo* with a good deal of sustained appeal, but O'Connor thinks that it's Forge that will be the biggest contributor to the longevity of *Halo 3*. For *Marathon* fans, the clue's in the name – it shares it with *Marathon 2*'s level editing software, and it's a feature that truly raises *Halo 3* from being merely the second sequel to an **Edge** 10 game. It's genuinely new, genuinely progressive. And it's going to be an enormous amount of fun.

"The ultimate task will be to beat every mission in Legendary difficulty with all skulls turned on in a certain time limit"

Think of a cross between the standard *Halo* multiplayer match and *LittleBigPlanet* and you're about there. Players join a Forge session, locally or online, as they would a multiplayer match, and can run and gun around any of the multiplayer maps as they normally would. But with a press of up on the D-pad their display interface changes, and they transform into a metallic ball that resembles a Guilty Spark-like Monitor and is able fly around and spawn a vast range of objects as well as freely place them on the map. By flying close to objects they can pick them up to move them around. Each object – guns, vehicles, crates, teleport and player spawn points – has a certain cost, each map a global budget. And the properties of each object – ammo levels, respawn rates – can be edited with the same depth Bungie's level designers have.

With the ability to save to hard drive or to Bungie's Live servers, Forge can be used to tweak existing maps for multiplayer matches by, for instance, moving a sniper rifle to subtly change the dynamic. It can be used to block access to areas to adapt the way a game flows.

But, most interestingly, it can be its own plaything. Already, Bungie has developed its own impromptu Forge game-types, such as the self-explanatory Jenga, and Grab the Mongoose, in which one player races around the map on a speeding Mongoose bike while all the others in editing mode try to move in close enough to catch it. And there's an adaptation of Team Slayer, in which each team has a Monitor player that supports by supplying it with weaponry, blocking the opposite team with objects or dropping fusion cores – *Halo*'s explosive barrels.

Each session we play begins with a plan and degenerates into a free-for-all. Two players start to see how high they can pile vehicles, building up a pyramid of grinding metal comprising Scorpion tanks, Wraiths and the new Mongooses. Multiplayer design lead **Tyson Green** and Jarrad stand behind. "It's going to all go wrong – this is really going to break it," says one with some glee, but the system already seems incredibly robust. The players transform out of editing mode and start firing rockets to see the pile erupt in cascades of explosions that go on for several seconds, and we all giggle in delight. The scope for players to invent is immense – by juggling spawn rates and positioning, you can see it's possible to create intricate perpetual-motion machines, impossibly teetering structures – it's an enthralling prospect.

Green explains that the idea is the result of a fundamental principle the team originally wanted to achieve in *Halo 3*: they wanted to profoundly extend how customisable it could be, but wanted to make it collaborative. "Everything we do in *Halo* is really social, so the map editor should be multiplayer," he says. "In *Halo 1* and *2* people had this rich sandbox and they just played in that environment, so with Forge we really want to support that, saying: 'Hey, here's an environment, here's all the tools in the sandbox. You can play with it all'."









Alongside the Theatre mode, in which replay data of game sessions can be saved, edited and uploaded to users' online shared spaces, *Halo 3* is an expression of Bungie's awareness of how *Halo* players of all types have approached the games. Not just the likes of Rooster Teeth and its Red vs Blue machinima, or people who exhaustively spent hours finding Byzantine ways of getting out of maps. It's also for more casual players. "Novice players can look up the Gamertag of the best players, or the Bungie team, and look through their shared space to download films," says Jarrad. "I think it's going to level the playing field because they'll be able to see the sure-fire tactics the best players use. And within hours everyone will have seen the video and seen ways of stopping it."

Players will be able to grab the map settings from any downloaded Theatre clip for their own games and even view them in groups online. Content in players' shared spaces will be shown on Bungie.net, with the ability to post comments and queue clips for download when players next load up the game online.

In many ways, *Halo 3* is a result of its fans-to-be. Every element is tuned for social interaction, acts of creation and idle play, and careful attention to the second-by-second experiences of simply playing the game. "Every game Bungie has made has in some way been about listening to what our fans have asked for," confirms Jarrad. "Within minutes of the beta starting there were *Halo* videos showing tactics, people trying to break the maps, doing things we never thought they would do. The way people can be creative in the game is exponentially greater than it ever was before. So our goal is to allow that to happen but not in a way that will negatively impact the game. For us, there's so much at stake with this game, so many new features and technologies – I'm not sure we could ever not hold public betas in future games."

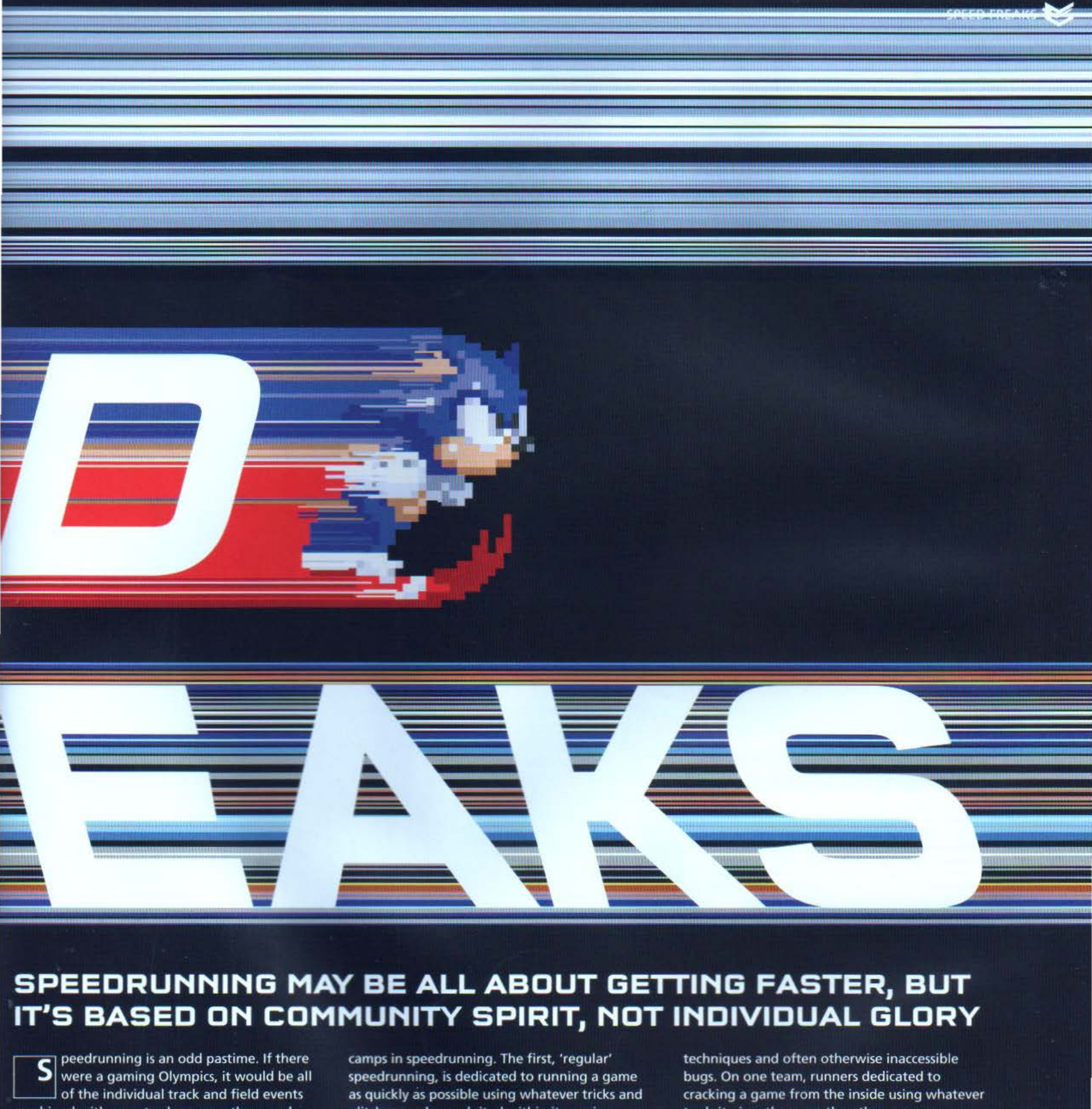
The level of such ambition has put huge pressure on Bungie. It could have simply updated the existing, proven components that already made *Halo* the legend it has become. "It's just the Bungie way," says Jarrad. "People here talk about *Halo 3* being the *Halo* game they always wanted to make. We want it to be the definitive experience the guys here always had in their heads."

Halo 3 will be a game of depth and scale, of mechanics, of appeal and of ambition. It's meticulously focused, yet radiant with expansive possibility. And, with two months of obsessive polishing to go, it's already one of the most supremely confident games we've ever seen. "But nothing will ever be good enough for the people in this building," claims Jarrad. "We always joke that at some point someone will have to come along and prise the code out of our hands because we will tweak and tune right up till the final second. And each day it just gets more fun to play."



New multiplayer maps revealed include Guardian (above), similar to Lockout, but in treetops. Sand Trap is the biggest map ever to grace *Halo*, and features two Elephant mobile bases, which act as respawn and flag points. Epitaph is set in a Forerunner installation


SPEE
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SPEEDRUNNING MAY BE ALL ABOUT GETTING FASTER, BUT IT'S BASED ON COMMUNITY SPIRIT, NOT INDIVIDUAL GLORY

Speedrunning is an odd pastime. If there were a gaming Olympics, it would be all of the individual track and field events combined with an extra-long marathon, and make mere decathletes look like wimps. The concept is relatively simple – to complete a game as quickly and skilfully as possible, within a competitive context – but the variations and possibilities within it have created one of gaming's most diverse subcultures.

That diversity spreads out from one fundamental schism. There are two distinct camps in speedrunning. The first, 'regular' speedrunning, is dedicated to running a game as quickly as possible using whatever tricks and glitches can be exploited within its engine. There are a multitude of variations on this theme, from completing a game with all items and secrets found to completing it with as few items as possible. The second, and the most recent, is tool-assisted speedrunning, or TAS. Typically dedicated to older games that can be emulated, TAS runners aim to complete a game as quickly as possible using frame-stop techniques and often otherwise inaccessible bugs. On one team, runners dedicated to cracking a game from the inside using whatever tools it gives them; on the other, runners dedicated to breaking it from above by whatever means necessary.

The games used for speedrunning range from *Doom* and *Quake* to *Mighty Bomb Jack*, *Kid Icarus*, *Micro Machines* and *The Addams Family*: the most obscure as well as the most populist are catered for. Remember *Alien Vs Predator* on the Jaguar? It can be completed in

six minutes and 34 seconds. It's a habit that speedrunners share with the writers of FAQs: the desire to work out games that aren't *Quake*, *Tomb Raider* or *Final Fantasy VII*. And though there are central titles that have retrospectively proved to be ideal candidates, which demand a groundhog day perseverance from their players, you can guarantee that someone somewhere will share your love of that obscure classic.

Thanks to this broad church approach it's difficult to trace the origins of speedrunning to a single game, but *Doom* was a major forerunner thanks to one particular feature: the ability to record a demo file of your playthrough. An online community quickly gathered around running *Doom* in various guises (see 'Nice ear, sir') that is still going strong. But speedrunning really came to prominence with *Doom*'s successor, *Quake*, after Anthony Bailey, a graduate student in computer science, saw a speedrun by one Yonatan Donner, and contacted him to suggest some improvements. Teaming up with Matthias Belz and Nolan Pflug, the quartet behind the legendary Quake Done Quick (QDQ) was formed. QDQ is a first in many ways, but primarily it was the first speedrun to include 're-camming', whereby the action is watched from somewhere other than the player's viewpoint, and also the first example of segmented speedrunning, whereby different players contribute different levels of the overall walkthrough. Thanks to the former, as well as some arch one-liners delivered during the dashing, QDQ can also justly claim to be a pioneer of machinima. Upon its release in June



The current world record for *Sonic The Hedgehog* stands at 18m 9s, a speed that would give the hedgehog himself motion sickness. And finally proof that Tails is an incubus: *Sonic 2* stands at 18m 54s

1997, it became an internet sensation and was carried by several PC magazines on cover CDs. For the first time, speedrunning hit a wider audience. The runthrough of *Quake* on Nightmare difficulty in 19m 49s was unheard of, yet by September 1997 Quake Done Quicker had improved this run to 16m 35s, and as of this writing the record stands at 12m 23s. Several segments have already been improved upon, and if any game can exemplify the fundamental rule of speedrunning then *Quake* is that game: you can always, always be faster.

It's appropriate that one of the fundamentals of QDQ was that it was a community project, as speedrunning in its current form is a community sport. Needless to say, both regular runners and TAS authors have their online presence and there are several speedrunning 'hubs': the major ones being the Speed Demos Archive (SDA), TASvideos, Metroid 2002 and Twin Galaxies. SDA was founded in 1998 as a *Quake* site, and expanded following a 2003 *Metroid Prime* 100 per cent run in 1h 37m by the site's founder, Nolan 'Radix' Pflug. Thanks to featuring on Slashdot, this run attracted a great deal of internet attention, as **Ali Campbell**, one of SDA's current administrators, recalls: "Many people were blown away, and I was no exception. I ended up downloading the whole thing on a 56k dialup modem!" The SDA is a repository in which speedruns of a vast number of games can be found, and as long as a verifier can be found for a run it can be posted – but no game-ruining glitches such as stepping outside of the gameworld, tool-assisted runs, or use of homebrew emulators are allowed. TASvideos performs a similar service for the TAS community, with detailed descriptions of how each video was achieved and what it contains. Twin Galaxies, however, is a more generalised site focusing on pinball and arcade high scores, numbers rather than methods, and posts no footage of their record holders.

This approach of simply looking at the incredible numbers in speedrunning, ironically enough, risks missing their real raison d'etre: the flights of gaming fancy therein. **Nathan Jahnke**, founder of Metroid 2002, points out that "imagination will only take you so far when playing pinball, and all pinball games have more or less the same mechanics. Videogames, by contrast being completely free of any kind of real-life physics or other common-sense rules, lend themselves well in many cases to imaginative 'outside of the box' solutions." The sheer skill, as well as the glitches, sequence breaks and alternative strategies, are the reason people are interested. Which is not to say that competition isn't a major part of speedrunning. "It's nearly always a single individual that performs a particular run," points out Campbell, "but the end product usually 'belongs' to the community as a whole in some way, because many people will have had input into it. I strongly believe that keeping everything open is by far the superior choice, not least because there's actually something to watch at the end."

"THE END PRODUCT USUALLY 'BELONGS' TO THE COMMUNITY AS A WHOLE, BECAUSE MANY PEOPLE WILL HAVE HAD INPUT INTO IT"

And the videos are definitely worth watching: how about completing *Super Mario World* with all 96 exits and only 1h 31m 30s on the clock? *Metroid Prime* in 1h 3m 50s? *A Link To The Past* in 1h 39m 47s? *Deus Ex* in 43m 20s? The skills on show are incredible, but the emphasis is on showing off within a context of collaboration – not playing a game so much as playing with a game. The biggest projects, such as Quake Done 100% Quick With A Vengeance, are opened up for public submissions, and although individuals are noted and praised for their efforts they are unquestionably (and proudly) part of the Quake Done Quick team rather than solo gunners. Watching the SDA forums churn is a surprising experience, not least for a talented runner being told off for



QUAKE & THE ELDER GOD SHRINE

There's always room for improvement, like The Grisly Grotto level improving from 45s to 23s over eight years, but one level can stand for *Quake* speedrunning writ large. The Elder God Shrine began in QDQ as a highly respectable 1m 21s by Yonaton Donner. It was discovered that a slope jump could be used at the very start of the level to skip an entire section, and Donner duly improved his time to 57s. Various tips and tricks have emerged since the latter became the optimal route, mostly involving grenade jumping, which meant the run was being cut down and down, alternate routes being planned to obtain extra health for more grenade jumps, and now the current record is held by one Peter Horvarth at a stunning 33s. It's begging for someone to claim it can't be beaten – just what runners specialise in.







'The History of *Quake* Speedrunning' on SDA is humorously uncompromising about its beginnings: 'All demos were recorded on Nightmare skill since that was considered to be the One True Skill worthy of Real Men's attention'. Indeed



A TAS of *Tetris* dedicated to achieving a very high score quickly through the simple method of voluntarily halving the screen, hence fewer frames for the blocks to pass before placement

placing his own accomplishments above that of the team, and the Mr Miyagi moments where old timers sagely remark 'I see your bunnyhopping has progressed quite a bit'. Need to know what triggers individual pain frames, or how to tweak your aiming parameters just right? They'll know.

QDQ spawned a host of experimentation within *Quake* itself, not least of which was the simple step of altering the difficulty level. Whereas QDQ was a Nightmare run, runs began appearing on Easy difficulty. This is not as simple a hierarchy as it may seem, as runs on a higher difficulty setting can often require a different strategy centred on minimising risk. **Cody Miller**, the current world record holder for completing *Halo 2* on Legendary (3h 16m 28s, and the first speedrun to make the Guinness Book Of Records), said in his submission that: "I approached each level thinking: 'What is the safest way to beat it?' Speed wasn't a concern, although often the fastest route is the safest. Even after finding the safest route through the game, it was still pretty damn hard." That may just win the understatement of the century award. With a game such as *Metroid Fusion* where, for example, random items are de-randomised on a lower difficulty, it can change the nature of the run entirely. Jahnke comments that "as long as the run is good, it can in some cases be an entirely different animal and therefore end up quite refreshing to watch."

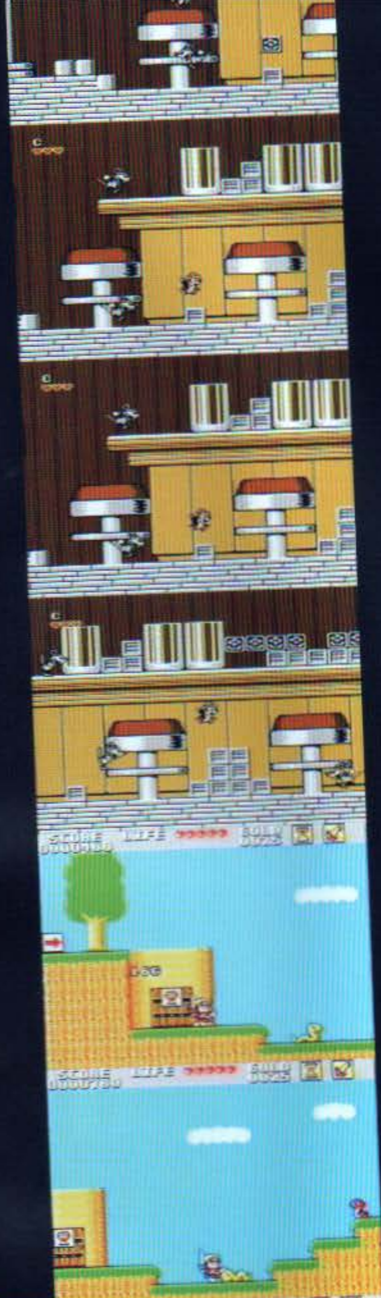
Regular speedruns, as they have evolved, have come to include these and more variations



as par for the course: the most common type of speedrun, Any%, means simply completing a game as quickly as possible and skipping as much as is needed. But there is Low%, completion with the lowest number of items possible, 100% or Maximum, where every item must be collected and enemy killed, or specified conditions which can vary from game to game. Runs can be done in one play session (single-segment) or multiple (multi-segment), although the latter tend to congregate around the more popular titles where specialisation is required – a runthrough of *Quake* will be ruined if one mistake is made or one glitch missed, such is the level of competition. And although tricks and tactics are frequently shared within the community, "at a certain point it just boils down to better execution," says **Mike Uyama**, a speedrunner on (among others) the *Contra*, *Metal Slug* and *MegaMan* series. "*Zelda* has a lot of tricks, shortcuts and sequence breaks that are discovered every month, so it's important to establish a good route and make sure you know all of the tricks. Yet games like *Contra* and *Mario* have no route-planning to speak of, so they depend on better execution, and in some cases luck." All the tricks in the book won't help if your basic play isn't up to it.

Given that basic standard, however, the tricks are fascinating – particularly 'sequence breaking'. Though runners don't agree on a single definition – thanks largely to an odd application, of all things, of the intentional fallacy – most take it as meaning the use of a route other than that intended by the game creators. Planning a route through an intricate game such as *Ocarina Of Time* incorporating all known shortcuts gives a chance of completion in 4h 46m, while in *Metroid* a playthrough can be altered dramatically by finding the ice beam before the bombs (which should be impossible).

The *Metroid* series in particular seems to have been made for route planning, with sequence breaks and hidden tricks abounding in the series. Every gamer knows that Samus has a morphball, but techniques have been found that are so widely exploited they have whole new terminologies in speedrunning circles: the mockball, which has a faster running speed; the waterball, which is used to fall through water more quickly; the kagoball, which allows you to morph through platforms. The variants on bomb jumping are equally impressive, from gaining infinite height and using the spring jumping technique in midair to using diagonal and horizontal bomb jumping across uncrossable gaps. The *Metroid* series is a perfect example of how non-linear design, combined with unintended consequences discovered by players, can give limitless possibilities – details of how the in-game clock works, how the beams can be combined for different effects, killing bosses before they can get near to Samus – and the level of competition is shown by the fact that





NES games prove very popular in running, and the warp zones make the *Mario* records seem incredible: *SMB* in 5m, *SMB2* in 9m 15s, and *SMB3* in 11m 03s. Or there's *Chip 'N Dale* (left) in 10m 57s

the current *Metroid Prime* record was set as recently as April this year.

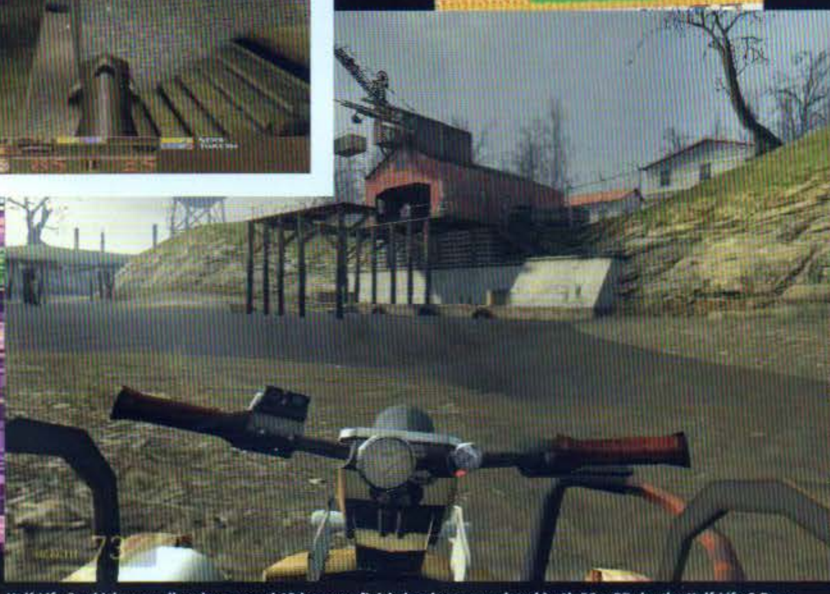
Most people that play the original *Metroid* in 2007 might be using an emulator. But this would automatically cause problems with SDA submission: one of the key distinctions between TAS and speedruns is that tool-assistance depends on the ability to emulate the game in question. Thus, while unassisted speedruns can make use of the latest console releases, TAS are always of games for older systems such as the NES or Mega Drive. So a *Zelda* speedrun for SDA would have to be made on a Nintendo machine, which removes the option for exploiting some glitches, such as in *A Link To The Past*, where holding both up and down on the D-pad allows you to skip rooms – impossible with a SNES controller, but possible on the GameCube pad. Glitches found through computer input are the TAS equivalent of sequence breaking, but can go for years without their applications being realised – one trick in *MegaMan* was rejected by TAS runners because it killed MegaMan. But late in 2006 those same players realised that using this trick at one point could ultimately benefit a run attempt, and ten seconds was shaved off the previous best. And that's a previous best achieved, at the very least, through a frame-by-frame input. At one remove, this might seem a dangerous level of obsession: but it's exactly the

ROCKET MAN

Perhaps the greatest unintended game trick is *Quake*'s rocket jump. A quirk of id's physics engine in which the player's velocity changed when they were hurt, the rocket jump allows players to significantly increase their jumping height by firing a well-aimed blast below their feet, adding a layer of strategy between your health and the optimum route. It's a delightful by-product of gaming logic that, rather than your feet disintegrating as the blast shudders up your burning spine, this allows you to negotiate environments faster at the expense of a few hit points, and it immediately became de rigeur (along with its uglier younger brother, bunnyhopping) for any serious speedrunner.







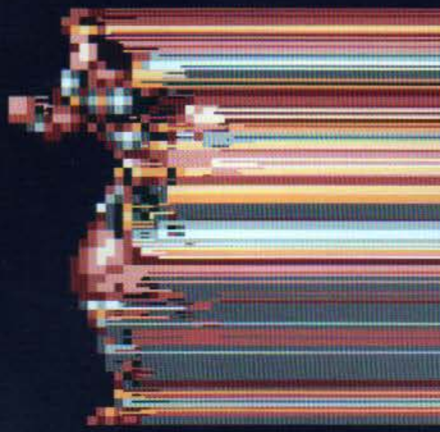
Half-Life 2, which normally takes around 12 hours to finish, has been completed in 1h 36m 57s by the Half-Life 2 Done Quick team, who also specialise in original names. *Wonderboy In Monster Land* (above) is equally impressive at 21m 27s





dedication required to make games betray their creators.

Tool-assisted speedrunning, in this sense, could be described as the theoretical side of speedrunning: probing for limits beyond the human rather than accepting corporeal limitations. The authors of tool-assisted runs are often positing an ideal solution for a particular game, demonstrating techniques that, though technically possible, are in all likelihood beyond most of humankind. Obviously, some degree of convergence with unassisted speedruns might be inevitable in terms of routes, but a typical TAS will seek to make the display of skill so outrageous that it can beggar belief. Exhibits A and B both feature Mario: the first, Morimoto's famous 2003 speedrun of *Super Mario Bros 3* in 11m 4s, relieved the boredom of the later levels by collecting 99 lives while constantly putting Mario in seemingly inescapable situations; the second, a speedrun of *Super Mario 64* in 15 minutes collecting only 16 stars thanks to several glitches has to be seen to be believed – Mario's astonishing long jumps between sections of levels, speed in the most precarious positions and sheer flair are a joy to watch.



Simply viewing these videos is enough to convince anyone of the potential of TAS as entertainment, and the simplistic notion that they somehow represent 'cheating' is very wide of the mark – not least for the fact that they are, in many cases, incredibly difficult to accomplish and require hours of tedious repetition and painstaking stitching together. But despite this, many 'unassisted' runners feel some degree of bitterness towards the TAS community, or perhaps more accurately towards the wider misunderstanding of what a TAS is, feeling they take too much focus away from genuine running. It has to be said that this is often despite the best efforts of the TAS community, which goes to great lengths to point out what their videos are: NESvideos is completely up front about what each TAS features, with the link to the video accompanied by clear explanations of the techniques used – 'takes damage to save time', 'abuses programming errors', 'aims for fastest time', 'all levels and secrets', 'manipulates luck'. Yet despite Morimoto's runthrough of *Super Mario Bros 3* not being the first example of its kind (or even of *Super Mario Bros 3*) and coming with a disclaimer, it was initially assumed to be genuine by non-speedrunners. This understandably caused considerable friction between the communities, although now that TAS videos are widely known about, unassisted runners find themselves faced, ironically enough, with the opposite problem. "Any impressive video of an emulable game is now automatically assumed to be fake, even if it isn't," points out Campbell. "Half the internet was of the incorrect opinion that Andrew Gardikis' *Super Mario Bros* five-minute run had been cheated."

"ANY IMPRESSIVE VIDEO OF AN EMULABLE GAME IS AUTOMATICALLY ASSUMED TO BE FAKE, EVEN IF IT ISN'T"

If the TAS *Mario* videos get the headlines, however, *MegaMan* is perhaps the TAS equivalent of *Metroid* in terms of ubiquity. The original NES games are riddled with bugs and glitches that allow skipping through walls, up ladders and down holes faster than should be possible. The game's structure, which allows you to choose the order of the levels (and therefore the order in which you obtain certain power-ups), is perfect for careful planning and variation, and the current fastest TAS of the 1987 game was posted as recently as November 2006. NESvideos plays host to a hack of NES *MegaMans 3* to *6*, all played at once on a four-way splitscreen and completed using a single input – in essence to show off, but also to prove that Capcom had recycled the basic structure so completely in each title. Joel Yliluoma, the founder of TASvideos, has developed a programme (BisqBot) which can plot an optimum route through short sections of *MegaMan* levels, making the playthrough seem incredible in its precision to the naked eye. *MegaMan* shows two things: TAS are created for entertainment, and to do this they push a game's engine to its limit. Morimoto claimed that his *SMB3* video took him two years to complete, frame by frame, and Yliluoma's runs on *MegaMan* have been iterative over a period of years. It might look it from the outside, but it's just not that fast to run with tools.

Ultimately, the superficial similarities between speedruns and TAS will always lead to a level of confusion outside of their respective communities, but the question of competition or convergence is a moot one. Campbell puts it bluntly: "A speedrun is a speedrun. A TAS is a TAS. The question is meaningless, because the two are not the same thing, and must never be considered to be." But if one is inspired by what a player can make the game do, and the other is inspired by what the player can do to the game, then they do share a common ground in a focus on entertainment, and on community. The latter is perhaps the most surprising aspect: something that would lend itself so easily to fierce competition, jealousy and backbiting is more of a celebration of collective endeavour and of what makes games great. When asked whether he was envious over any record speedrun, Jahnke may speak for a lot of speedrunners: "I don't think I've ever produced anything truly great, and so I can't really imagine what it would be like. I definitely prefer helping tens of thousands of people a day see incredible things in hundreds of games to holding down an elite position in one particular title."



Joel Yliluoma's Bisqbot, a program that analyses *MegaMan* and checks all possible inputs to find the quickest route – but even in *MegaMan* the number of possible inputs stops indiscriminate use

NICE EAR, SIR

The early *Doom* speedrunning community was something like a boy scout meeting, with badges given out for specific feats and a spirit of achievement at any level. The Doom Honorific Titles website allowed players to lay claim to an award in several categories by submitting videos to the site's judges. There was Tyson, where you had to beat a level on Ultraviolence setting killing all monsters using only your fists and a pistol; Pacifist, which required killing no more monsters than was necessary to complete the level; Schwarzenegger, which entailed completing the game on Ultraviolence with no deaths or saves; and Reality, finishing a level on Ultraviolence with all kills and no damage taken. It fostered specialists in each area that would go on to become speedrunning demons, thanks in part to its leaderboards, and *Doom* maintains a healthy speedrunning community today.



Review

New games assessed in words and numbers

Edge's most played

Colin McRae: DIRT



Learning the kinks and quirks of every track has never been so enticing – but then few games have offered tracks realised with quite as much detail and character.
360, CODEMASTERS

Halo 2



There's fierce competition for Ascension's sniper positions and Lockout's pulpits of power as we return to the lord of multiplayer in anticipation of its successor.
XBOX, MICROSOFT

Pokémon Diamond/Pearl



Sinnoh has been explored – but when your Pokédex isn't even half-full, have you seen anything? Time to make friends in the office and sheepishly trade. Too good for kids.
DS, NINTENDO

Saturday night at the movies
Is it the final cut for movie licences?



Spider-Man 3 had a main character that was fun to play as, a history of half-decent games in the last generation, and an action movie licence behind it – so why did it all end up as a fundamentally sub-par game?

Summer may be quiet for games, but in the world of movies it's blockbuster season. Big-budget films like Spider-Man 3, Transformers and Pirates Of The Caribbean 3 have publicity juggernauts, and part of these merchandising strategies are the same ropey old games.

It's easy to see why developers fall over themselves for the rights to a blockbuster: it's a cast-iron way to guarantee an investment return. A glance at the charts shows the above plus *Harry Potter*, *Shrek The Third* and *Fantastic Four: Rise Of The Silver Surfer*, but even older names like *Rocky Balboa* and *300* are still some of the PSP's biggest sellers. But of these eight games, perhaps one – *Harry Potter* – is of an above-average standard.

They might seem to be suffering from their timetables, with both *Spider-Man 3* and *Transformers* noticeably incomplete, but this doesn't excuse more fundamental problems, and both are even descendants of superior titles from the previous generation. Is it that developers don't care enough about the source materials to make rewarding interactive experiences? After all, fans will forgive anything for wish fulfilment – swing like Spider-Man, fly like Superman, punch like Rocky – in which case they'll accept a mediocre game with appropriate character skins.

But these games' focus on superficiality is the very reason so few of them are even close to average – they never attempt to go beyond styling. As this month's review notes, *Transformers* epitomises this, bookending its limp, restricted battles with cutscenes featuring action that is impossible in-game. These cutscenes don't support *Transformers*: they're being used as a crutch, to hide the limitations of a game hamstrung by linearity and crippled by an absence of solutions to its widespread design problems.

Films take place over a period of a few hours. Videogames don't, and they've been around long enough that their unique strengths are obvious: they must be treated as a mode of expression rather than more pieces of merchandise. Developers must be allowed to create an expansive universe that cinema can only hint at, rather than crushing their vision into celluloid's limits. We need games to be weightier alternatives to good popcorn fare rather than anaemic afterthoughts.

Edge's scoring system explained:
1 = one, 2 = two, 3 = three,
4 = four, 5 = five, 6 = six, 7 = seven,
8 = eight, 9 = nine, 10 = ten





THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: PHANTOM HOURGLASS

FORMAT: DS PRICE: ¥4,800 (£20)
RELEASE: OUT NOW (JAPAN), OCTOBER 1 (US), TBC (UK)
PUBLISHER: NINTENDO DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE









***Phantom Hourglass* is so exquisite to play that its equally exquisite looks end up as a mere footnote. It's easily the most handsome and most technically sophisticated DS game, and an extremely welcome return for *Wind Waker*'s cartoon style and peerless animation**

Zelda games don't often take the form of an explicit, chronological sequel. When they do it usually indicates a restlessness, a desire to break free of the series' rituals and find out what happens next. The last was when *Majora's Mask* appended a dark coda to *Ocarina*'s strait-laced epic. But though *Phantom Hourglass* revives the innocent high-seas adventure of *The Wind Waker*, it takes no such risks – and small wonder. It is, after all, the first *Zelda* on Nintendo's most successful system in years, and ten million sales of *New Super Mario Bros* have already shown the value of bringing old formulae to new hands. So we get a princess in peril – Zelda, in her guise as Tetra the pirate, is spirited away by a haunted ship – and a focused sprint through seven dungeons to save her.

But that isn't the whole picture. Quite unlike the polished traditionalism of the DS versions of *Mario Bros* and *Mario Kart*, *Phantom Hourglass* is a game completely remoulded by its platform. It achieves the deep, all-encompassing synthesis with the host hardware that Nintendo's designers are famous for, but hadn't yet attempted with the idiosyncratic features of the all-things-to-all-men DS. It is an instinctive, ingenious joy to play for every minute, and it sets a new gold standard for game interface design on any platform.

Though it boasts vibrant, solid 3D

It achieves the deep, all-encompassing synthesis with the host hardware that Nintendo's designers are famous for, but hadn't yet attempted with DS



The game can be controlled exclusively with the stylus, but four buttons are used as shortcuts. The sheer elegance of *Phantom Hourglass*' scheme inspires hopes that Nintendo will one day nail Wii controls so perfectly

graphics in the *Wind Waker* vein, *Phantom Hourglass* is viewed with an angled top-down perspective, and for the most part designed exactly like the 2D games in the series. Link is controlled with the stylus – or more accurately, his Navi-style fairy is, and he runs after it if it's at the edge of the screen, or walks slowly if it's right next to him. It's as if an analogue stick radiates out from him, and it provides even more sensitive and precise input. Within minutes of play, the idea of going back to a D-pad seems unthinkable, the reason all DS games haven't been made this way unfathomable.

To open a chest, press a switch or talk to someone, just tap on it and Link will scamper up and get busy. To throw a bomb or aim an arrow, hold a shoulder button to arm it, tap where you want it to go and it will land with unerring accuracy. Sword attacks are accomplished with taps, slashes and circles so self-explanatory they don't need to be detailed. The boomerang follows any course you prescribe for it in the air. The map sits on the top screen most of the time, but pull it down and you can annotate it by hand, a





simple stroke of genius that would transform the *Zelda* experience even if it wasn't for the brilliant puzzles that deliberately involve this feature. Maps have always formed a crucial, if awkward, part of RPGs and adventure games, and they have never, ever been better integrated or implemented than this.

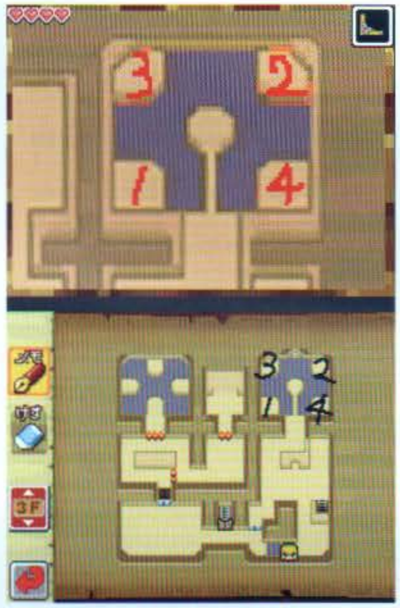
In that context, the sea-chart-based exploration of an oceanic overworld, *Wind Waker*-style, is a perfect fit. It's a much more compact body of water than in the GameCube game, and rather than needing to manipulate the winds, you use the stylus to plot the course for the paddle-steamer Link shares with a cowardly dandy of a sea captain. Freed of the need to steer, en route you can pan around the full-3D view and engage in cannon battles with enemies. Not all of the tedium of seafaring has been relieved – and some of the romance has evaporated – but it's a pleasant change of pace, enlivened by a new treasure-salvage minigame. (All treasure hunting is optional, but the search for new parts with which to customise your ship proves as compulsive as it is pointless.)

The sea also adds a sense of expansiveness to what is, in fact, an extremely compressed *Zelda* with relatively little side-questing and errand-running in its tiny towns, and only brief interludes between its small, dense, varied and very puzzle-inflected dungeons. Of the six regular dungeons, only the last is a major challenge, but all are rich in devious and delightful ideas that exploit *Phantom Hourglass*' new interactions to the full and without repetition. These six are connected by making return visits to one deep master dungeon, the castle of the Sea King. Here the titular hourglass comes into play, keeping Link alive for ever-longer periods in its poisonous purple mists. Mist-free areas provide total refuge from the ticking clock and guards' eyes; without them the return visits, repeated sections and time-attack stealth play would have erred on the wrong side of frustration. As it stands, it's a refreshing and clever new design, without which players would have been risking a sleepwalk through 2D *Zelda* convention, and it also gifts an excellent little multiplayer mode (see 'Spy versus spies').

In the context of the *Zelda* series, *Phantom Hourglass* is a solid but slightly lightweight proposition. Arguably, a brisker game which trims some design fat (dungeon compasses and wallets to name two) is exactly what *Zelda* needs. But in the context of the DS catalogue it's a giant of a game, perhaps the best yet, and certainly the fullest expression of this unique machine's charms. Blowing dust off a sea-chart with a puff into the mic; triangulating the position of a secret cave; snapping the DS shut to transfer a stamp from one screen to the other; making notes and plotting courses, and above all steering that indomitable, irrepressible little hero with such flawless grace and urgency – they all bring just one thing to mind, with simple, joyful clarity: adventure. In this greatest of game series, there's no higher recommendation than that. **[9]**



Treasure comes in two forms. Ship parts are randomly assigned and you can end up with duplicates. Crests can be used to level-up your three fairies, and choosing which is Link's guide adds powers to his sword



It's hard to think of a single firstparty DS game that hasn't influenced *Phantom Hourglass* in some way, from *Brain Training* to *Animal Crossing*. Its willingness to borrow as well as innovate are what make it the machine's defining second-generation masterpiece

Spy versus spies



The keen disappointment of the abandonment of a full-fledged DS version of *Four Swords* is relieved by *Phantom Hourglass*' simple but taut and highly entertaining multiplayer mode. Modelled after the stealth sections of the Sea King's castle, the twoplayer game has one player control Link directly, and the other control three guards by frantically drawing their paths on the map in realtime. Link must fetch Triforce segments – the larger they are, the more points they're worth, but the slower Link moves – back to his safe zone without being caught or his time running out, at which point the turns switch. There's nothing to it, but in the best-designed mazes this is an addictive and hotly contested riot, and it supports wifi, ad-hoc and DS download play modes.



Boss battles generate some grandeur by spanning both screens and, occasionally, shifting the perspective. The most memorable encounter sees Link face off against an invisible enemy whose viewpoint is on the top screen; just find yourself, aim towards the camera and shoot



BLUE DRAGON

FORMAT: 360 PRICE: £50 RELEASE: AUGUST 24
PUBLISHER: MICROSOFT DEVELOPER: MISTWALKER/ARTOON
PREVIOUSLY IN: E164, E170, E172





Uematsu's score is varied in style through *Blue Dragon*. An Iron Maiden-style rock song soundtracks each boss battle while an African dance track (weirdly sung in Japanese) features later in the game

Listen carefully to the arpeggios of *Blue Dragon*'s opening theme, and you'll hear *Final Fantasy* patterns stirring deep within the melody. Indeed, echoes resound throughout almost every artistic and mechanical aspect to this, Microsoft's first heavyweight entry into the Japanese RPG genre.

It's no surprise that *Blue Dragon* shares family resemblances with Square Enix's flagship series. *Blue Dragon*'s breeding is illustrious, bringing together *Final Fantasy* creator Hironobu Sakaguchi, composer Nobuo Uemtasu and *Dragon Quest* character artist Akira Toriyama. It's a team that Microsoft has banked on to create the definitive JRPG for a console that has so far failed to appeal to this significant fanbase – and Japan in general.

It's perhaps for this reason that *Blue Dragon* so fiercely adheres to convention. The creators have allowed themselves only the most subtle and gentle of generic subversions throughout this otherwise relentlessly orthodox game. It eschews the most recent *Final Fantasy*'s innovations, instead conforming to the aged framework its creator helped build some 20 years ago, a conservatism presumably encouraged by Microsoft in order to woo a new eastern audience instead of further challenging or disorientating it.

As such, the game's three main protagonists (joined later by two more) are plucky and youthful, swept away from their rural lifestyle into a whirlwind adventure to save the world. The rhythm of play is comforting in its familiarity: explore dungeons, battle monsters for Exp, augment character abilities, face off against powerful bosses, enjoy cutscene.

But, with the game on Japanese shelves for over six months now, *Blue Dragon*'s purpose has shifted to satiating a western audience, one perhaps less tolerant of tired and unadventurous role-play. While *Dragon Quest VIII*'s by-the-numbers adventuring might have won over critics and consumers alike with its bright charm and flair, the 360 is a platform less suited to whimsy and nostalgia. In fact it's debatable that there's enough room in this niche for two such products and, viewed through this comparative lens, *Blue Dragon* immediately falters.





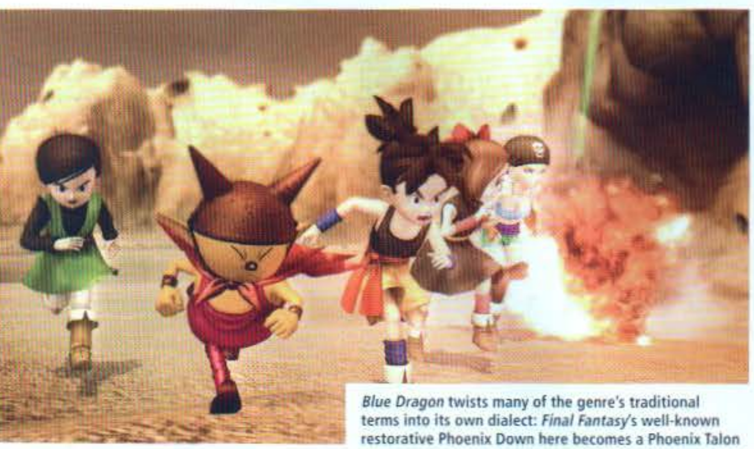
The game repeatedly makes stabs at scatological humour with many enemies resembling 'poos'. Some enemies even drop golden poos that can be searched (with audio) for extra cash



The rhythm of play is comforting in its familiarity: explore dungeons, battle monsters, augment abilities, face off against powerful bosses

The game's clean, near sterile environments seem implausibly clinical when set against *Final Fantasy XII*'s aged cobbled streets and unkempt foliage. One dungeon, set in a derelict hospital, looks as if it was built yesterday, never stepped in before your arrival. It's difficult to overstate the value of imperfection to creating lived-in authenticity when faced with such cold flawlessness. Likewise, Toriyama's artwork, now popped into a 3D world devoid of cel-shading, loses its illustrative quality and as a result seems uncomfortable and out of place.

This backdrop frames a plot that's painfully slow moving and thoroughly unchallenging. Dialogue is stilted and unnatural and the lines and morals are trotted out without subtlety, shade or even personality. The characters become quickly implausible and difficult to empathise with, unaided by the hyperactive American voice-acting, which exhibits none of the sensitive, mature and diverse localisation of Square Enix's recent games. These factors conspire to pitch the game's narrative at an audience far too young for its flipside: the complex battle system.



***Blue Dragon* twists many of the genre's traditional terms into its own dialect: *Final Fantasy*'s well-known restorative Phoenix Down here becomes a Phoenix Talon**



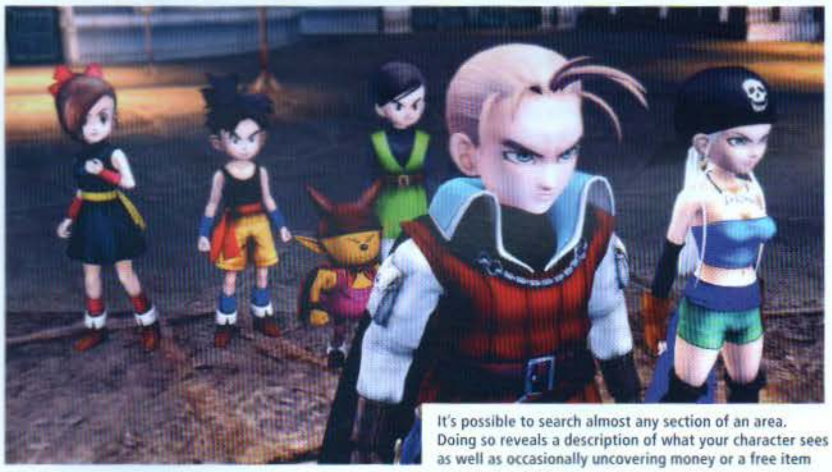


The odd swear word flavours the young protagonists' dialogue, but these always feel incongruous to the otherwise childish ruminations of *Blue Dragon*'s plot and script



Slowdown, particularly during the casting of spells, is an irritating and frequent intrusion to play





It's possible to search almost any section of an area. Doing so reveals a description of what your character sees as well as occasionally uncovering money or a free item

That *Blue Dragon* majors on battles more han perhaps any other recent example of he genre is, in many ways, its salvation. Vhile the core mechanic is a simple, turn-ased affair, without even so much as an ctive Battle Gauge encouraging you to nake your menu decisions quickly, there are nough idiosyncrasies to make it interesting. Inusually, there are no weapons or armour. stead, beast-like shadows tower above ach of your characters and it's these avatars at execute your commands.

The design is essentially based upon *Final antasy V*'s much-lauded job system. As well s earning Exp, characters receive Skill Points, hich level up whichever job class you've ssigned to your shadow beast. A slew of stinctive vocations are available to each your shadows, each offering different onuses and skillsets. As you level up a job ass you unlock new abilities, which can be uipped and carried over into another job class. The system affords tight control over team development.

That this development system is so compelling is just as well: it often takes up to an hour to traverse a dungeon. While there are no random battles, for the first 15 hours you will need to fight almost every monster you encounter, especially if you intend to find the enormous number of chests in each environment.

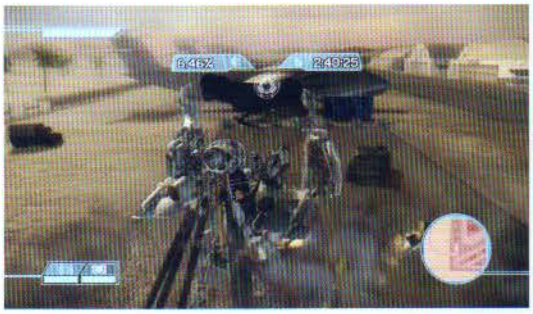
But though the game incessantly throws enemies at you, it's never actually very challenging and failure or death is a rare occurrence. In fact, the most likely obstacle to progression is getting lost in the labyrinthine dungeons, which are never satisfactorily mapped.

Ultimately, if you were to remove the famous names from *Blue Dragon*, it would undoubtedly receive only quiet attention. It's too rooted in tradition and too uninspired in its exploration of convention. Even the shine of its exciting and varied battle system dulls after 20 hours or so as the game settles into a tiring grind. Without characters to care for or a story compelling enough, only the most dedicated genre faithful will make it through *Blue Dragon*'s three discs. **[6]**

Brief encounter

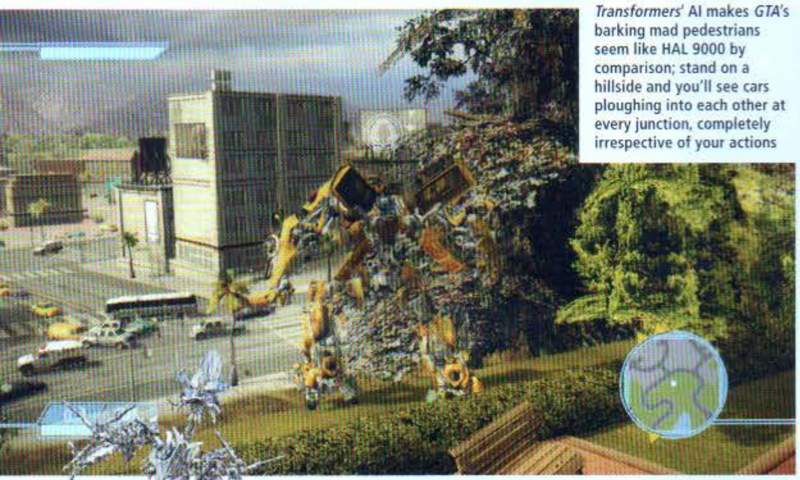


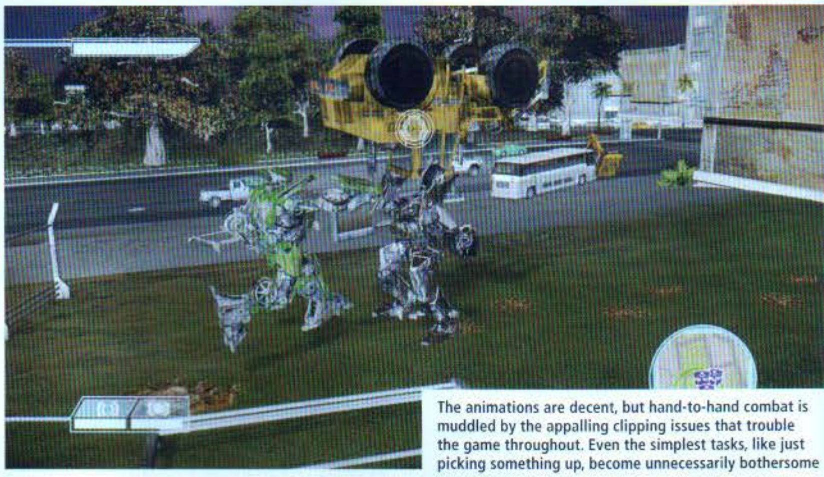
As enemies are visible and have their own field of vision, there are some extra tactical considerations to bear in mind when exploring. If you can manage to sneak around the back of an enemy you can initiate a rear attack, giving you a free shot advantage on your opponent. It's also possible, by holding the right trigger, to tackle numerous targets within your 'encounter circle' at once. Enemy monsters enjoy their own rivalries between species and you can initiate three-way monster battles in this manner. In the latter stages of upgrading job classes you'll even unlock abilities to use in the field, for example to paralyse enemies (for easy rear attacks), or even one which defeats weak opponents without the need to do battle.





Transformers' AI makes *GTA*'s barking mad pedestrians seem like HAL 9000 by comparison; stand on a hillside and you'll see cars ploughing into each other at every junction, completely irrespective of your actions





The animations are decent, but hand-to-hand combat is muddled by the appalling clipping issues that trouble the game throughout. Even the simplest tasks, like just picking something up, become unnecessarily bothersome

TRANSFORMERS: THE GAME

FORMAT: 360 (VERSION TESTED), PC, PS2, PS3, Wii
PRICE: £50 **RELEASE:** OUT NOW **PUBLISHER:** ACTIVISION
DEVELOPER: TRAVELLER'S TALES

As unlikely as it now seems in retrospect, there were hopes that this movie licence could actually produce an accompanying game of basic competence, for two key reasons. First, Atari's take on the franchise, arriving on PS2 in 2004, was a fine piece of entertainment, proving, if proof were ever needed, that a great game could be constructed around the struggle between Autobot and Decepticon. Second, developer Traveller's Tales has already established that it is capable of taking a movie licence and manipulating it into something fresh – the *Lego Star Wars* series being a case in point.

It was, however, a vain hope. Not only does this resoundingly poor game fail to follow the pointers left by its videogame predecessors, but it also mishandles the film's material, cramming a lazy facsimile of its action into a series of repetitive, simplistic chores. Even if the code was truly complete – and it is a very long way from that most fundamental of goals – this would not be a good game.

Describing the game at all is simply to tick off a litany of annoyances punctuated by one minor triumph, namely that the Transformers themselves look pretty good. However, given that the developers have otherwise crafted a world of stultifying dullness, the inclination is to attribute this to the film's production studio, which has been magnanimous enough to share some art assets with the game.

Transformers' claims of an open world are only true in the loosest of terms: any comparison to the staple titles of that genre renders this example contemptible. These blocky, poorly textured environments are cramped affairs, the merest handful of square miles hemmed in by invisible walls, their paltry attractions exhausted within a matter of minutes. While you're allowed to select a mission at your leisure by driving into the glowing green 'action zone', the benefits of free-roaming are largely illusory in a world where there is nothing interesting to do – besides which, should you dally before accepting a mission, you find the instructions to proceed to the next action zone being repeated ad infinitum.

The missions themselves are based around a very small number of poorly considered mechanics and range from uninspired to atrocious. The mainstays of these tasks, driving and fighting, are essentially crippled – the cars handle like air hockey pucks, and combat is almost wholly reduced to lobbing bits of scenery. Few of your opponents are actually affected by your guns, and many will continuously block your poorly clipped melee efforts, meaning that the only way to damage them is to pick up objects and hurl them with enervating repetition – a tedious task reduced to nonsense by wretchedly buggy implementation.

Transformers: The Game is a dire mess, a much less accomplished experience than its movie inspiration, and ultimately a wasted opportunity. Activision could have remained more faithful to the film had it taken the entire shipment of this clumsy aberration and buried it in the Arctic. **[2]**

Awfulbot



Your fight with Bumblebee is a good example of just how unrewarding an experience *Transformers* is. Defeating him is a truly dreary process – simple to the point of mindlessness, but pointlessly protracted. Then the moment of victory is interrupted by a prerendered cutscene and a clumsy deus ex machina resurrects the Transformer you have just reduced to scrap for the umpteenth time and whisks it away to a new location to be defeated once again. This is the format for the entire game – crude repetition, interspersed by cutscenes that cheat you of your agency.





Flying's less terrible than driving, and the Decepticon levels are marginally more enjoyable, mostly because you have free reign to destroy things. It soon bores, though



ODIN SPHERE

FORMAT: PS2 PRICE: $40 (£20) RELEASE: OUT NOW (US, JAPAN), TBA (UK)
PUBLISHER: ATLUS USA DEVELOPER: VANILLAWARE

P*rincess Crown*, one of the Sega Saturn's Japanese jewels, is widely regarded as one of 2D videogaming's prettiest swansongs. In *Odin Sphere*, a semi-follow up to this ten-year-old side-scrolling action RPG, history seems to be repeating itself. Appearing beyond fashionably late to the PS2 party, it lifts the veil on some of the greatest interactive 2D sprite work videogames have yet seen.

Onion-layered parallax backgrounds draw the eye deep into this purplish fantasy world as screen-tall, pin-sharp sprites flit, fly and lock swords in foreground-filling balletic combat. Eschewing obvious anime designs, the visuals instead betray an art team drunk on imagination. Weirdly exaggerated body dimensions create wonderful and individualistic characters while gigantic bosses stretch across three screens' worth of virtual space to provide mesmerising conclusions to the game's labyrinthine levels.

But all of this ostentatious graphical resplendence comes at a heavy price. The exuberance, inventiveness and inimitable character of the visuals seem to have hogged the developer's gutsy creativity. In its mechanics and design the game falls back on tried and tested formulae that soon drain any initial awestruck excitement from the world of Erion.

Essentially a side-scrolling beat 'em up, across the course of the game *Odin Sphere* presses into your hands control of five different characters. Each character brings a different thread to the story and, despite the often-banal dialogue, the voice-acting and interesting over-arching story manage to engage. In play, characters have a simple roster of moves, of which the double jump and dive attack are the only ones to encourage anything more considered than combo-triggering button-mashing.

Levels are comprised of a set of circular and interconnected stages. Run to the far left or right of the screen and you'll eventually come back to where you started. Each stage has an entrance and a number of exits that lead off to neighbouring stages in a honeycomb complex. By clearing all of the enemies in a stage you're gifted with treasure chests and new items, the quality and quantity of which is determined by your performance, represented with an alphabetical grade.

Stuttering slowdown undermines *Odin Sphere*'s pretty face almost anywhere outside of its non-interactive cutscenes. The game frequently (and cheaply) throws large numbers of enemies at you in order to ramp up the difficulty and prolong the experience. As such, you'll often be fighting your own patience as well as the onscreen antagonists as the game slows to such an extent it's at times possible to count the number of frames grinding by per second.

Other irritations further sour the experience. Text cannot be skipped, and long loading times between stages break the otherwise fast-moving flow of play. An extremely tight limit on the number of items you can carry (even when expanded with an upgrade) makes interruptive item micro-management an all too frequent necessity in a game that encourages item hoarding.

That the game's numerous niggles don't ruin the experience sooner is testament to its unusual artistic coherence which creates a compelling world. But familiarity does eventually break the visual spell to reveal a mostly average and repetitive game underneath, one that requires too much time and effort to fully unmask. **[6]**



Souls can be ingested to fill a magic gauge which in turn allows you to fire off different spells (left). Hitoshi Sakamoto, composer of *Final Fantasy Tactics*' renowned score, has written the music for *Odin Sphere* and, as you might expect, it brings further richness to the world





While Europeans have sadly not benefited from its efforts, it's still encouraging to see Atlus achieve simultaneous Japanese and US release, a move that will ideally become routine for the company's future releases





Atlus' translation for *Odin Sphere* may be lacking the imagination of some of the company's other recent output, but the excellent dual-language voice-acting in Japanese or English helps to bring the script to life

Food for thought



One of *Odin Sphere*'s core diversions is its item synthesis and cookery mechanic. Enemies drop all manner of different foodstuffs, and eating these imparts experience to your character. Restaurants interspersed in levels allow you to try out recipes to create bonus experience-giving meals. On-the-fly mixing of potions is also repeatedly encouraged but, since the interface for combining ingredients is clumsy and long-winded, few players will fully explore its intricacies.



OSU! TATAKAE! OUENDAN 2

FORMAT: DS PRICE: ¥6,000 (£24) RELEASE: OUT NOW (JAPAN)
PUBLISHER: NINTENDO DEVELOPER: INIS PREVIOUSLY IN: E176







A red-headed sumo wrestler has the task of winning a tournament in order to support his young siblings. Inis has had fun voicing the song-opening calls of 'ouendaan!', especially in the ditty about the werewolf, which ends the call with a howl

Two tribes



New to *Ouendan 2* is the introduction of a narrative that runs over the top of the individual songs. It's about rivalry between the jackbooted stars of the first game, the Yuhi Town ouendan, who perform in all the songs that take place on the eastern side of the map, and the Asahi Town ouendan, a new team with a less, shall we say, fascist appearance, who appear for songs in the west. The two teams have different chant styles, but the competition between the opposing sides abates when they join for the epic final song, which, as in the first title, transports the game from the local scale to a global one.

After the series' international jaunt in the guise of the westernised *Elite Beat Agents*, *Ouendan 2* lands firmly back on Japanese terra firma. It returns to a 3D version of the city in which the charmingly exaggerated everyday stories from 2005's original took place, and even features cameos from some of the same characters. But *Ouendan 2* also retains all of the welcome tweaks and innovations that *Elite Beat Agents* brought to the series, plus a few new ones of its own.

The basic game is untouched: each of the 16 songs (plus three unlockables) is a story about a character facing a form of adversity and in need of your cheerleading team to pump them into a rhythmic froth of new confidence. This is achieved through tapping beat markers, following phrase markers and spinning roll markers on the DS's touchscreen in time to the music, another collection of fruity J-pop. Missing markers reduces the life bar – reach zero and the song is failed.



This song is about a girls' choir with too few members that's about be disbanded. As the game goes it's a dull story, but is enlivened by the appearance of a boar at the end and the music, Kaela Kimura's Real Life Real Heart

The series' traditional tight expression of the music remains intact, with the exception of a couple of tracks, such as Mihimaru GT's Kibun Jojo, in which rhythm during a rapped section can be hard to follow. The difficulty bar on normal mode is slightly more forgiving than in the first game, and the use of *Elite Beat Agents*' skippable intros and epilogues, the ability to save replay data for a ghost multiplayer mode and fourplayer multiplayer has made *Ouendan 2* friendlier – as does its easy mode feature, which can allow a restart at the point in a song at which it was failed.

To mitigate this, a horrifyingly hardcore new play mode has been added: on easy level the circles that indicate timings for hitting markers are removed, on medium the markers themselves only appear briefly, and on hard they aren't displayed at all.

The storytelling is much the same as before – again, the songs tell personal vignettes about universally recognisable problems: a bed-wetting infant doing all he can to stop dreaming about water; an insomniac author with writer's block; a college-leaver facing an arduous job-entry exam. Each is spiced with a delightful, often bizarre, narrative, told through animated storyboards. They exhibit an almost identical visual style as before, though they seem just slightly more consistent and vibrant.

Where *Ouendan 2*'s stories differ is in their increased use of text, making them harder to understand for non-Japanese speakers, and some seem slightly more complex and culturally specific; it seems that the first game was able to bag the bulk of the simplest, most graphic themes. The result is a new, thoroughly entertaining, reliance on the surreal. There's the old man told that in



Characters are happy to appear in songs other than their own: here, the sumo wrestler from the above screenshots fails to plug a hole in a dam in the dreams of a bed-wetting boy. It also contains a Nintendo-themed cameo

order to get his pension he must defeat an ogre on an island as he did when he was a youth. And there's the shoe salesman who blasts off to the stars to sell his wares to aliens. But though the details can be fantastical, the base themes of challenge, love, disappointment and hope are always thoroughly grounded.

Ouendan 2's fine new set of songs and stories and fine-tuned mechanics make it another easy choice for import. The series' delightful play on the universals of music and personal adversity once again prevails. **[8]**





MONSTER MADNESS: BATTLE FOR SUBURBIA

FORMAT: 360, PC **PRICE:** £45 (360), £20 (PC) **RELEASE:** OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: SOUTHPEAK **DEVELOPER:** ARTIFICIAL STUDIOS

At a time when there is a dearth of Xbox 360 games which support single-screen multiplayer, *Monster Madness* should be a refreshing arrival – a frantic button-mashing fourplayer romp through 20 levels of B-movie horror. It's clearly intended as the spiritual successor to that equally chaotic title for the SNES and Mega Drive, *Zombies Ate My Neighbors*, and features a similar onslaught of teen-horror clichés and an overabundance of monsters drawn without any real discerning selection process from the annals of schlock. But while *Monster Madness* does much to scratch the co-op itch, and offers some titillating online modes, it sullies it with patchy execution and a series of poor design choices.

Such flaws unfortunately congregate in a crucial area – the controls have not been especially well considered for the 360's pad, making unintuitive use of the analogue sticks as buttons for jumping and dodging. The combat has little finesse besides; you have few options to fend off the multiple attackers with which the game bombards you, the result being that you spend most of your time in retreat, picking off the bad guys who stray into range one by one.

Nonetheless, the huge variety of makeshift weapons and absurd enemies makes the game a colourful experience and its relentlessly flippant exploitation of B-movie formulae is endearing. It also, at rare moments, rises above button-mashing to become reasonably tactical, as you end up reserving powerful ranged weaponry to pick off more dangerous melee enemies. If only switching between your weapons wasn't so awkward, being shared between shoulder bumpers, D-pad and face buttons.

In fact, the design of *Monster Madness* rapidly unravels under scrutiny – it would be hard to begrudge its focus on gratifyingly superficial nonsense, even at its high price, were it a well-polished title, but it has enough holes to make the triviality of its offering significantly less palatable. Invisible walls, that laziest kludge of game design, are in abundance – sometimes placed between two explorable areas simply to shoo the player down the prescribed route. That you can skip through large sections simply by hammering the dodge button suggests a failure to balance the controls with the game's design, while the infrequent checkpoints cannot, rather ungenerously, be loaded from the menu, meaning that large sections need to be replayed if you quit halfway through a level. Since these checkpoints don't restore health, and are not always placed near a means of recuperation (vending machines), you can find yourself repeatedly placed in a hopeless situation with no recourse but to start the whole level again.

The problems of the checkpoint system largely disappear when played in co-op, as you have the opportunity to resurrect fellow players. Indeed, as is inevitably the case, the whole game is made vastly more entertaining when played with friends (and it is all the more odd that no online co-op is present). As well as ramping up the onscreen mayhem, having a few friends on the couch adds the opportunity for a little teamwork, though never straying too far from arcadey frenzy. The problem is that, while players may be hungry for the kind of mindless co-op that *Monster Madness* has on offer, its side dish of thoughtless design makes the whole thing a little less appetising. **[5]**



Exploding zombies will predictably rush at you and detonate, dealing out a great deal of damage. It's best to save your ranged weaponry for these kinds of enemies – taking them down before you get in the blast radius





Online multiplayer offers a good number of different PVP modes but, surprisingly, doesn't provide any support for co-operative play



Delightfully, there's no attempt to make sense of the kind of enemies you'll have to fight – while crossing the pond at the local park (one of the game's ill-advised vehicle sections), you are menaced by pirate ships

Tool order



In order to obtain much of the game's more exotic weaponry, you will have to collect the cogs, gears, pipes and springs which are strewn about the levels, and hand them in to the local Demon Hunter for conversion into a device of deadly destruction. It seems like an interesting RPG element at first – different weapons requiring different proportions of components – but ultimately there is no strategy to it at all; you can't see how many of each part you have, and there are too many possible components of which to keep track.



EXIT 2

FORMAT: PSP PRICE: £30 RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: TAITO DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE









Exit 2 presents you with various relatively simple obstacles, from fires to doors to a simple drop – but in combination these elements can prove surprisingly complex. At least the exits aren't disguised…

The original *Exit* was a bright point for the PSP, a neat platform-puzzler with animation reminiscent of the likes of *Flashback* and a visual style of bright colours and thick lines that suited the platform perfectly. The sequel sees the return of Mr Esc, an escapologist who has to move through locations that have suffered various kinds of disaster and rescue the survivors.

Each level has a number of survivors that have to be saved, but their skills are also essential for helping Mr Esc negotiate a route to the exit. There are various rules governing their movement dependent on their type – children can't swim but can crawl into small spaces to fetch items, while adults can push heavy blocks but need help to climb, and so on.

Despite levels being timed, the game has a louche and thoughtful quality that means you'll often work out a solution before taking a step. This slow pace can occasionally be a frustration, however, because *Exit 2*'s clockwork levels don't allow much in the way of backtracking and the smallest oversight in your plan at any stage will force a restart. It's not a deal-breaker by any means, particularly as each level is relatively short, but these moments are when small things like the limited and repeating voice samples begin to irritate.

The game has plenty of content, and Taito promises up to 400 additional download stages. *Exit 2* is more of the same, but it's generous with it, and as such the overall package stacks up impressively. **[7]**



As you progress the possibilities for movement within the stages increase, such as with this lift, while guiding your cohorts nods to *Lemmings*



HOUR OF VICTORY

FORMAT: 360 (VERSION TESTED), PC
PRICE: £40 RELEASE: OUT NOW (360), TBA (PC)
PUBLISHER: MIDWAY DEVELOPER: NFUSION





A tank-driving castle-escape mission sees the game at its agonising worst, the Nazis employing some kind of trick cement that makes your tracks randomly sink into the ground

Look at it this way: it wouldn't be WWII if at least some Americans didn't turn up late. Sensing the opportunity for one last nuts-and-bolts offensive before everyone dies of battle fatigue, Midway has thrown together just such an FPS, forgetting in its haste to include the nuts, the bolts, or anything else that might stop it falling apart the second it begins.

It's not often that a war game captures almost perfectly the feel of walking drunk through a Las Vegas casino – that overpowering mix of randomness, mediocrity and nausea. Yet nFusion, developer of the forgettable *Dirty Dozen* and *Line Of Sight: Vietnam*, has somehow pulled it off. Many of *Hour Of Victory*'s high-ranking officers appear to be wearing make-up, most of its walls are lacquered in some kind of wax, and its Nazis are so fickle that they'll run around rooms several times before taking cover. Clipping and detection issues abound, geometry pops in and out, and the surround sound mix is among the worst we've ever heard.

Built almost entirely out of parts stolen from *Call Of Duty* and *Medal Of Honor*, the game flings them together with enough blind force to break even basic elements like automatic reloads and grenade throwing arcs. Its headline feature, a trio of playable characters who approach each objective in their own 'unique' way, is a sham, levels imposing preposterous rules on who's allowed to go where. Accordingly, only a Ranger has the faculties to climb a rope, a Covert Operative the tools for unlocking doors, and a Commando the brute strength to move furniture.

To call it a throwback to games a decade old would insult the games in question, which at least drew the best from the hardware at their disposal. *Hour Of Victory* isn't dated, just incompetent; its passable looks are a credit to Unreal Engine 3 more than its developer's art. Those inclined to harvest Achievement points can at least exploit its desperate generosity, and fans of comic malfunction are also in for a mischievous treat. Everyone else, however, should sooner shoot themselves in the foot. **[2]**



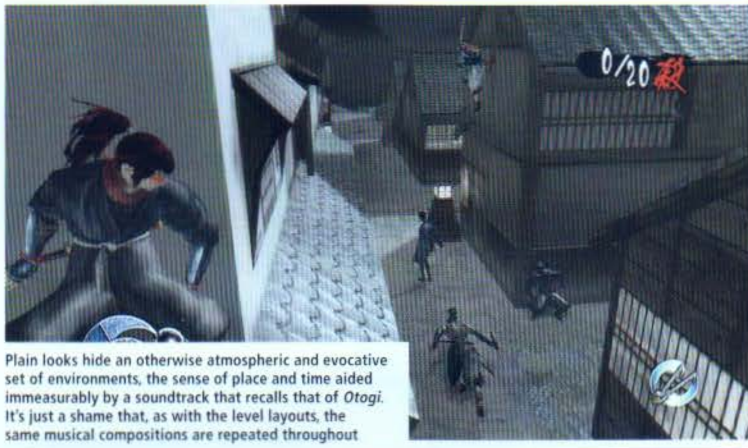


Besides featuring some of the worst CTF maps in history, the multiplayer component suggests no attempt to re-balance the game for deathmatch





Character customisation is depressingly limited at first, but blossoms as progress through the missions is made. The lack of a name or any sort of personality for the main character is typical of the game's approach to narrative, which it tends to get out of the way as quickly possible



Plain looks hide an otherwise atmospheric and evocative set of environments, the sense of place and time aided immeasurably by a soundtrack that recalls that of *Otogi*. It's just a shame that, as with the level layouts, the same musical compositions are repeated throughout





TENCHU Z

FORMAT: 360 PRICE: £35 RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: MICROSOFT DEVELOPER: K2

It's easy to be dismissive of *Tenchu Z*. Technically, it looks little more notable than a mid-period Xbox title (albeit one with HD sharpness). Character models, animation and textures are basic. The AI is incapable of doing much more than chasing you for ten seconds before returning to predefined patrol routes and can break with ease, leaving enemies running on the spot, held in place by the vase right in front of their feet. Level layouts are reused numerous times. Its multiplayer has the feel of a rushed afterthought, and it's possible to complete most missions in a couple of minutes by heading straight for the target and ignoring everything else. It's clearly been created on a painfully restricted budget.

There's veracity behind all of those complaints. Another truth, however, is that they don't matter quite so much as you'd expect, because there are some important things that *Tenchu Z* gets right.

While stealth has largely been defined within videogames as hiding in shadow or in a box, observing AI routines and making your move only when you know the coast is clear, *Tenchu Z*'s main protagonist is agile, quick and capable of causing harm with brutal precision.

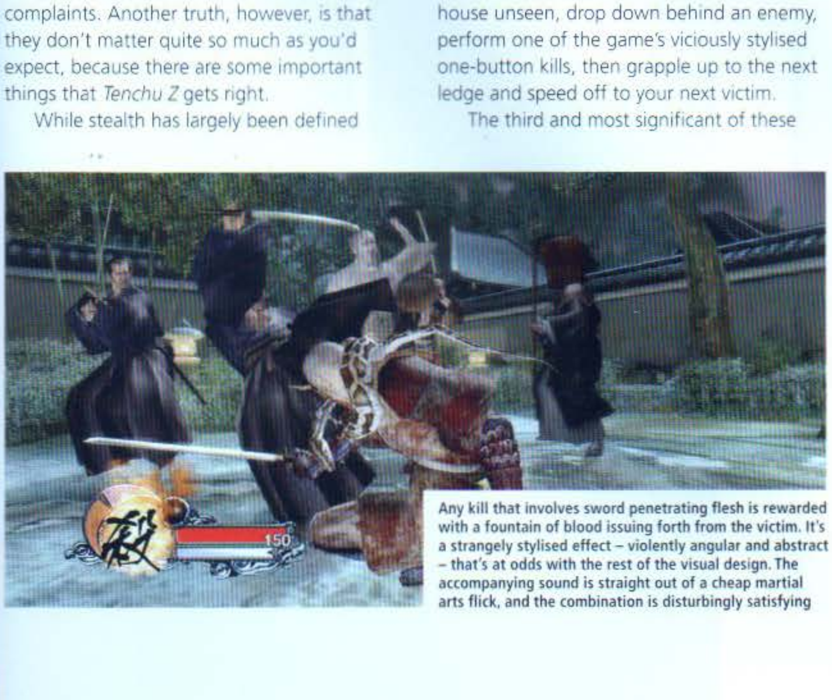
This sensation is created by the player character's three most important abilities. The first two are a permanently available grappling hook and the facility to land a fall from any height silently. Combined, the effect is one of complete empowerment, the relatively small size of the levels becoming an irrelevance as you realise the fun available in simply moving around them. *Tenchu*'s environments aren't the dingy, indistinct corridors of other stealth titles, they're playgrounds. Grapple to a ledge, run across a house unseen, drop down behind an enemy, perform one of the game's viciously stylised one-button kills, then grapple up to the next ledge and speed off to your next victim.

The third and most significant of these gameplay elements is the realisation of stealth kills. It initially seems to be little more than the system seen in most other games of the genre: get close behind a foe unseen and a circular icon appears, indicating that they can either be grabbed around the neck to be dragged away and/or knocked out, or else killed immediately. The familiar waiting game: find a hiding place, wait for the enemy to present his back, attack.

But then you run around a corner and bump straight into an enemy by accident. And you see it, just for a split second: that same circular icon flashing up in front of you, a tiny but accessible window of opportunity.

It's surprising how one simple idea can add so much enjoyment to the game. No longer does the player need to spend the majority of the game motionless – instead, dash towards an opponent and run them through just as they realise you're there. There's no flipping out, but it's still a hugely satisfying form of ninja action.

Its levels are too small and too easy only if they're played for completion, as opposed to enjoyment. The crude AI is fit for purpose, a set of toy soldiers waiting to be knocked over, a world of clockwork timing and placement to be memorised and pulled apart, cog by cog. It's a game that's full of faults, but also one in which they can be immaterial to the experience of playing. **[6]**



Any kill that involves sword penetrating flesh is rewarded with a fountain of blood issuing forth from the victim. It's a strangely stylised effect – violently angular and abstract – that's at odds with the rest of the visual design. The accompanying sound is straight out of a cheap martial arts flick, and the combination is disturbingly satisfying

Short cuts



There's a surprisingly deep system of swordplay tucked away in here, which only begins to show its range once a significant portion of the game has been completed. Combos, juggles and a range of parries give the impression of beat 'em up sophistication, but it's largely a wasted effort because mission ranks are based around taking out as many enemies as possible with silent attacks. Rare, ill-advised bosses allow strategies to be put to some use, but are more efficiently dealt with by abusing their poor AI and pushing them off ledges or attacking while they taunt you.



CALLING ALL CARS

FORMAT: PS3 PRICE: £5 RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: SCEE DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE



Each of the four maps is themed and has its own specific obstacles – but in certain cases these simply amount to certain buildings being destructible and others not. A missed opportunity

Calling All Cars is an oddity. A multiplayer affair in which four cars compete to pick up criminals, then return them to jail for points, it's a game that's made by simplicity but undone by superficiality.

First, the good points. The production values are very high: the comic-book-style graphics are chunky, colourful and complemented by an appropriately bouncy, jolly soundtrack, with a jokey cod-Oirish voiceover throwing the odd comment at the action. The multiplayer experience is what *Calling All Cars* is designed for, and it can shine, but it's far better suited to knockabout splitscreen than online play. Initially, it seems like an interesting package.

But the paucity of content then quickly becomes clear: all four maps will be played through after 20 minutes, and the variations aren't pronounced enough to make any of them endlessly replayable classics. *Mashed* on previous consoles had a wider variety of maps and modes, in some respects looked better, and in terms of top-down fourplayer battle racing it provided much more longterm appeal than *Calling All Cars*. It seems to be a reflection of the fact that developers are creating games to sell at budget prices and viewing the small amount of money involved as justification for lack of content.

It's hard to criticise much about *Calling All Cars*, because it's clearly been put together with some skill, but the fundamental issues cannot be ignored. There aren't enough maps, there aren't enough distinctions between the vehicles, and there's just not enough meat on what feel like solid bones. **[6]**





After bumping into the lag or the car carrying him, he flies into the air for a moment while the landing zone is shown in red: cue the best moments of the game in frantic four-way jostling



TOM CLANCY'S GHOST RECON ADVANCED WARFIGHTER 2

FORMAT: PC PRICE: £35 RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: UBISOFT DEVELOPER: GRIN PREVIOUSLY IN: E173, E177

Ubisoft seems to be changing tactics in its multi-console domination strategy: previously, successful titles for one platform were automatically given slipshod ports that failed to account for the idiosyncrasies of their destined medium. Now, if *GRAW 2* on PC is anything to go by, the company is ready to release almost entirely different games on various platforms, but all with the exact same name. It's almost like progress.

Though the Ghosts' PC outing follows essentially the same story and utilises some of the same dialogue as its console brethren, the game is otherwise entirely new, pursuing an emphasis on no-frills, hardcore tactics. As well as a switch to firstperson, the game introduces a greater level of control over your troops – using the mouse's third button to select individual members of your unit. An expanded tactical map allows you to set waypoints for the troops, queue up orders and execute them in realtime. The levels, although sharing some similar objectives to the console versions, do not mimic their design, and allow for a lot more freedom in your approach of the objective.

It's an admirable attempt to take a console-favouring formula and revise it to the tastes of PC gamers. Unfortunately, a large number of rough edges stop the game from attaining the levels of success it deserves. Your teammates are as dumb as rocks: when they finally respond to commands, their path-finding leaves much to be desired, meandering ponderously towards the location, taking in the sights along the way.

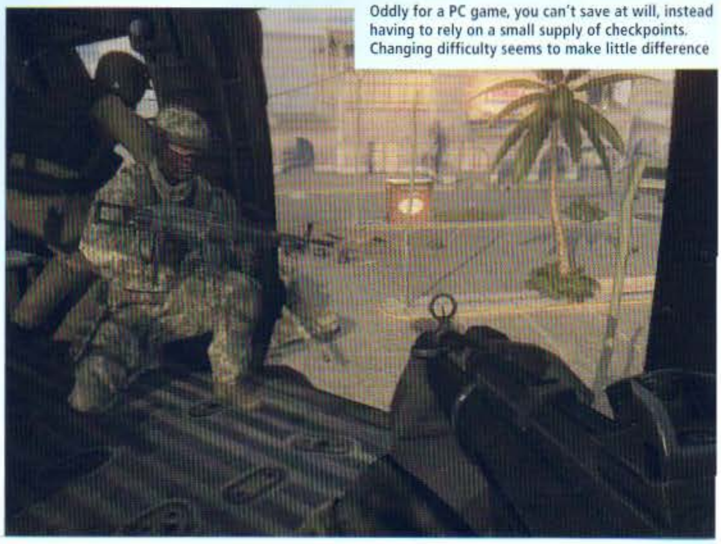
Their incompetence wouldn't be so problematic were the game less ruthlessly hard, or more generous with checkpoints. Frequently you'll find yourself replaying lengthy sections again and again, only to be gunned down at the last minute as a result of a sudden difficulty spike or, occasionally, because a shocking oversight during bug-testing renders you immobile and vulnerable during what should be an end cinematic.

For the most part, the game has been intelligently repositioned for the PC platform, but a lack of polish means that many minor flaws coalesce to make the experience a rather uneven one, often obscuring the creators' worthwhile efforts. **[6]**





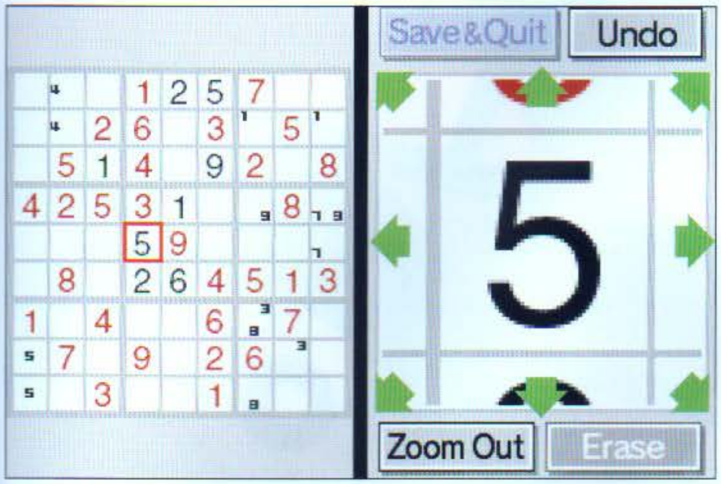
Oddly for a PC game, you can't save at will, instead having to rely on a small supply of checkpoints. Changing difficulty seems to make little difference





MORE BRAIN TRAINING FROM DR KAWASHIMA: HOW OLD IS YOUR BRAIN?

FORMAT: DS PRICE: £20 RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: NINTENDO DEVELOPER: IN HOUSE



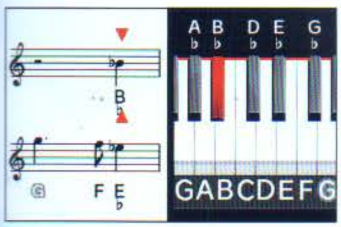
More Brain Training sees the return of the sudoku – although, if you are thinking of dipping in during a ten-minute bus journey, be warned that Dr Kawashima may demand other errands of you first

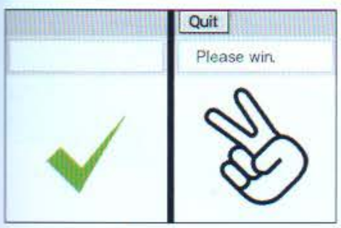
To some extent, the proliferation of a good idea is always welcome, but to those of us familiar with the previous title, *More Brain Training* needs to convincingly answer three interrelated questions: how many more mind-refining minigame titles of such a functionally similar ilk do we really need? Does this sequel contribute something complementary to the original? Does it improve substantially on the original's flaws? *More Brain Training* does not produce the assurances we may seek.

Taken on its own merits, *More Brain Training* is as successful as the original – a game which, through some obscure magic, has managed to engage us for ten minutes every day since its release, performing drills that should really be dull. To its credit, *More Brain Training* replaces most of these with tasks which, while ultimately for the same purpose, are framed in a slightly more appealing manner.

However, there is little else that adds value over the original, and the game is strangely reticent to deal with the previous title's few flaws. Handwriting recognition still has its issues, and the game doesn't always make adequate room for its own inaccuracies. Dr Kawashima's disembodied head continues to bombard with relentless cheer, although it would help if he didn't repeat himself so often, or was easier to skip through – sometimes, when you fancy hopping in and tackling a sudoku, the doctor's interjection with a compulsory series of acrostics is not altogether appreciated. Sloppily, meanwhile, some anagram puzzles have solutions that aren't recognised.

More Brain Training is no worse in this respect than the preceding title – one whose appeal easily outweighed such minor faults. However, whereas our appetite for entertainment is such that we will happily consume similar amusements again and again, we have to ask if we really need to learn these lessons twice. **[7]**





Playing the piano is diverting enough, but one of the better games is a version of Scissors Paper Stone in which the opponent's choice is shown plus the desired outcome of the round – you have to bark the appropriate option into the mic



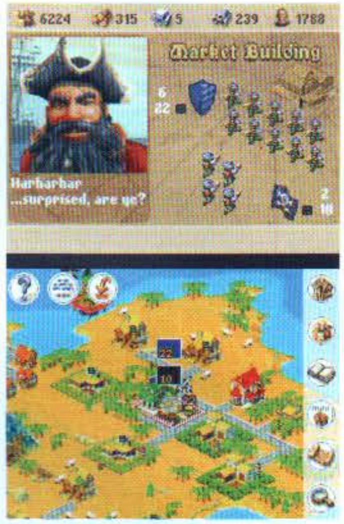
ANNO 1701: DAWN OF DISCOVERY

FORMAT: DS PRICE: £30 RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: DISNEY INTERACTIVE STUDIOS
DEVELOPER: KEEN GAMES

Germany's most successful PC game franchise, the colonisation and city-building game *Anno* here makes a successful leap to handheld. Originally developed by Sunflowers, the Frankfurt-based Keen Games has overseen its port to the DS, reshaping gameplay to be more suited to the device. What the team has created is a game of considerable scope, far surpassing the handheld's reputation for ephemeral casual gaming.

It is not simply a facsimile of the PC version, however – obviously much has had to change graphically, although the art style for this type of game does not suffer from being more abstracted or rendered in 2D.

The game's focus on building and maintaining a network of cities is interrupted by challenges: the increasing demands of your citizens; the threat of rival colonies; environmental dangers of the volcanic regions you have chosen to inhabit. Progress is defined by continuous scaling – your first tasks are simply to gather enough basic resources to build your city, but this rapidly becomes secondary to your maintenance of civil contentment. Keeping citizens happy is essential as it determines the amount of tax you can raise. Without careful monitoring, it's easy to find your society locked into a downward spiral, going from minor civil discontent to total bankruptcy at some speed. However, such situations result from the game's labyrinthine complexity rather than a failure to communicate what is required of the player.



Although the game's depth precludes fulsome exploration of its features in multiplayer, it offers multiple options for victory conditions so rounds don't need to last long, unless you want them to

For the most part, *Anno* is deeply engrossing, and the implementation across the dual screens of the DS is well executed. It has minor issues: occasionally, the game's reliance on iconography can frustrate, exploration is dull and unnecessary, and the military system can be unintuitive and cumbersome. But, in terms of the game's central challenge, it excels at dividing the player's attention between ambitions for continuous expansion and the manual maintenance of the empire as it stands. In many ways, *Anno* is perfectly suited to the DS – it's the kind of game you can put down when you want, and yet it also offers engagement of substantial depth. **[8]**





Oddly, the combat system requires you to adjust the demand for troops to be stationed within each of your municipal buildings rather than actually giving you control over the units themselves



TIME EXTEND

MADE IN WARIO

FORMAT: **GBA**
PUBLISHER: **NINTENDO**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **2003**



Mario may still hog the limelight, but is it Wario who's really pushing Nintendo forward?

If you ever want to convince yourself that the entertainment industry is doomed, why not grab a sheet of paper and spend the afternoon trying to define exactly what 'fun' is. This, after all, is what game companies in particular are meant to make their money selling to us. But what is it? What are its characteristics and components? Why do some find it in manipulating every heavily researched lever and dial of a submarine simulator, while others seek it in the pure abstraction of *Rez* or *Tetris*?



At times, *Made In Wario* almost seems psychic, zeroing in on the little games you often play in your own head while going about your day. An 'avoiding cracks in the pavement' game can't be far off

Hardcore Nintendo fans weren't sure what they'd make of it Hundreds of individual games? Five-second playing times? One-word instructions?

Just as it seems that 'fun' must be hopelessly subjective, another difficult word to add to the list next to big hitters like 'art' and 'love', along comes a game with almost universal appeal, a game so disarming and ridiculous, so seemingly slight, that you'd be forgiven for assuming it didn't contain any insights into anything at all. But *Made In Wario* is a rare beast: fun that practically everybody agrees about.

At first glance, that might seem surprising. Nearing release, *Made In Wario* looked so willfully niche not even hardcore Nintendo fans were sure what they'd make of it. Hundreds of individual games? Five-second playing times? One-word instructions? How could it work?

In fact, it works almost flawlessly. Wario reduces four decades of videogaming to first principles, cutting away the clutter and dilution, the apocalyptic storylines, the bulk and bloat that have weighed so many titles down. All that's left is the simple notion of pressing a button and making something happen, that vital piece of DNA that has powered every game since *Spacewar*. Although it's overflowing with ideas, *Wario* has embraced the lost art of brevity, cramming heroics, sports, car chases,



WARIO'S WARES

While none of the *Made In Wario* games disappoint, the original remains the best, as surprising and anarchic now as it was in 2003. More recent versions for the DS and Wii have seen the formula settle into something of a groove, as master of ceremonies for new hardware and input devices. The benefits of such a trend is that you're guaranteed at least one quality title every launch time, but the downside is that the *Wario* team has become so proficient at squeezing each and every conceivable gimmick from a new console that future releases may have their work cut out for them.

fireworks, humour and surprise into the length of time it takes most people to tie their shoelaces. It's a game about games, revelling in every limitation of the form and parodying Nintendo's own back catalogue. It's about history, too, a title that could only be produced when gaming had achieved a kind of critical mass of nostalgia and established conventions. It's a game that you may feel you've been spending your whole life practicing for, and yet non-gamers can take to it as easily as *Minesweeper*.

Early reviews were positive but often slightly baffled, lauding it for its humour but regularly missing the wider significance. After all, important games are meant to feel important when you first play them: most titles announce their own magnitude with all the subtlety of Wagner presiding over global thermonuclear war. Although most reviewers put a brave face on it, confusion reigned. Most disconcerting, and a sign that the industry may have steadily been losing its way all these years, is that the greatest hurdle *Made In Wario* had to overcome was that it initially seemed too entertaining. It wasn't just fun – it was too much fun to be respectable, too much fun to be taken seriously.

That hasn't stopped it from bringing serious change to the industry, however. That laughable oddball turned out to be the defining battle in a very Nintendo-styled war. This, it seems, was the real revolution, and its novel approach – bite-sized, gimmick gaming to fit in around your normal life – has been massively influential. How much of Nintendo's new strategy – the success of the DS and Wii, and even, to a certain extent, the industry-wide craze for casual gaming – can be traced back to this starting point? Mario may still be the company mascot, but it might be Wario who's worth more in the long run, as his catalogue of new moves like prodding, poking and sneezing start to really rival jumping and running in gamers' affections.

Obvious in hindsight, it was still a gamble. The danger of taking 40 years of gaming conventions apart in as swift and clear-eyed a manner as Nintendo did is that you run the risk you'll be left with nothing but a handful of useless nuts and bolts that may not fit back together again. Reducing games to mere button presses, a space-chimp's educational diet of simple cause and effect, might have easily become a thoroughly depressing exercise. Dodge, jump, match, aim: summer holidays spent indoors with the curtains drawn, friendships sacrificed, fortunes squandered on the latest hardware, and all for this?

But, of course, the final product is anything but depressing. *Made In Wario* is not a joyless videogame deconstruction, but rather a powerful affirmation of the skills that transform such cause and effect into something far more involving. Even as it hits you that many of the microgames use exactly the same mechanics over and over again, you marvel at how a reworked presentation – from clip-art to lush anime, abstract shapes to Polaroid photography – can make the same experience feel so utterly different each time. *Made In Wario* serves to illustrate exactly why you can never define a game by its contro scheme alone – they're much more complex machines, with scenario, art style, feedback and timing all playing their roles.

The danger of taking 40 years of conventions apart is that you run the risk you'll be left with nothing but a handful of useless nuts and bolts

Few games have shown such willingness to continuously shed their skins, abandoning all established rule on presentation. An antidote to endless corridors and the same old warehouses and crates, every five seconds *Made In Wario* takes you somewhere utterly different: underwater, back to school, off to the races. It's a greedy approach delicatel weighted to appeal to as wide a variety of gamers as possible – quick-paced and mindless for those who want nothing more than a series of colourful surprises, but deep enough and shot through with score targets and unlockables for players who need something to master.

Alongside variety, *Made In Wario* uses another weapon few other

Made In Wario brought in a new array of classic characters. From disco fop Jimmy to malevolent taxi drivers Dribble and Spitz, Diamond City is starting to rival the Mushroom Kingdom in terms of star power

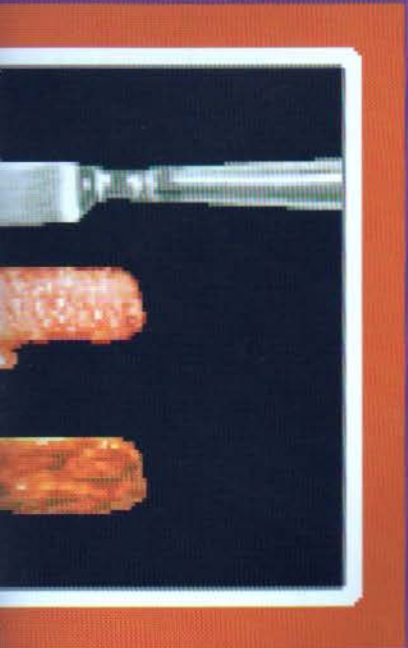








The soundtrack is a cheesy joy. Enhanced by an arsenal of cackles and jibes from the man himself, it's a game that demands to be played with the sound up

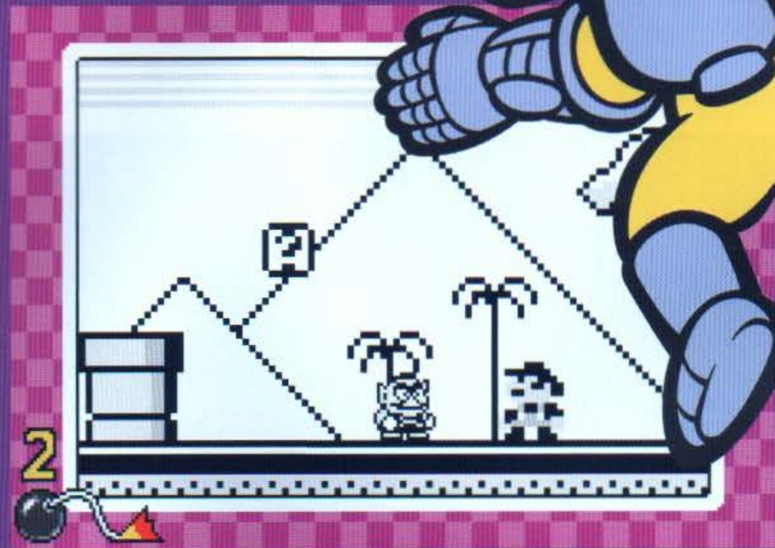


games bother with: familiarity. Bringing gaming into the kitchen, the bathroom and the office, no aspect of real life is out of bounds. Welcoming to non-gamers, the results also ensure a strange kind of intimacy: whether it's catching toast or getting a haircut, *Made In Wario* plays out on a uniquely personal level.

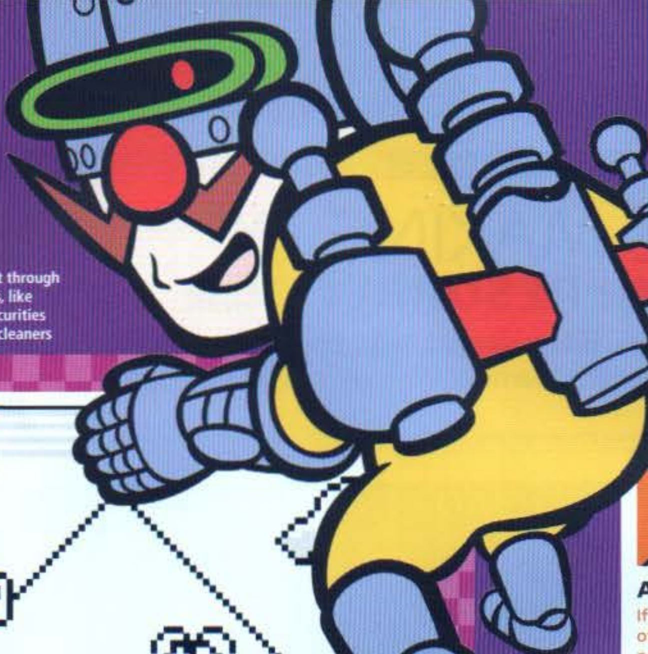
Yet if it was simply force of numbers and quirky real-world subject matter that made it work, *Made in Wario* would be easy to copy. However, it's failure that seems to await every company tempted by that deceptively handmade look. One of *Wario*'s least charming legacies is the endless minigame compilations that swarm and multiply in its wake, eroding goodwill and drowning the Wii in particular in the worst kind of shovelware. Although everyone seems to be trying, no one can quite recreate the magic formula. Titles like *Rayman: Raving Rabbids* and *Hot PXL*, though well-intentioned, copy the mechanics but miss the joy, their quirkiness becoming hollow and then shrill, like a comic who picks on the audience when his material dies.



It's vital to clear the last game out of your mind to make way for the rules of the next. The burning fuse at the bottom of the screen adds to the tension



9-Volt's games provide an exhilarating blast through Nintendo's back catalogue from the classics, like *Super Mario Bros* and *Zelda*, to ancient obscurities like *Chiritorie*, a 1979 game about vacuum cleaners



One of the crucial things separating *Made In Wario* from its competitors is that simple five-second rule at its heart. Sometimes, as Rayman in particular discovered, even 30 seconds can be too long to stretch a mechanic built for the blink of an eye. Equally, rivals often miss the bigger picture, failing to spot the way the individual games work as a whole, setting up routines and then riffing, sharing textures and echoing earlier designs, parodying and subverting the rules as they go along.

It's this deep self-involvement that gives Wario's games their consistency: there's a simple but effective internal rhythm at work, using repetition and deviation to make you by turns both satisfied and surprised. While each game follows a simple personal path of rising speed and complexity, there's no guessing how a later variant will twist its basic premise, luring you in and then making you jump, reversing pivotal roles, or suddenly turning a game that used to be about administering eye-drops into a game about explosive laser vision.

So while no single videogame will ever be capable of completely demystifying fun, *Made In Wario* is at least able to fill in some of the blanks. Flighty yet deep, it's certainly chosen to cover its bases, but there are universal elements at work too – pattern recognition, brevity, carefully placed twists – all of which perform on a level that bypasses mere taste and preference. Eventually, though, there's a point at which simple analysis comes up short. Choose a favourite: the family avoiding the giant glass tumbler, the paper plane endlessly spiralling downstairs, the dog that wants you to shake its hand – could you really put your finger on exactly why it appeals to you?

That's a thought that should keep Nintendo's competitors awake at night. And here's another: while the trends it helped set in motion are quietly disrupting the balance of the current hardware generation, and the formula that made its success so effortless continues to elude all imitators, perhaps the most intimidating aspect of *Made In Wario* is its breezy self assurance. What at first may have seemed like carelessness is actually a potently youthful self-confidence, seen best in the way the game flippantly toys with Nintendo's own closely guarded crown jewels. That a title this brashly exuberant, a game so seemingly ad-libbed and explosive, should come from a company which might rightfully be settling into creaking middle age should give pause to the entire industry. *Made In Wario* may seem easy, and even childish, but it isn't. That's because, ultimately, fun is a very serious business.



A GAME APPEARS

If museums took a leaf out of Wario's book, perhaps not so many of them would need to be free, as the 9-Volt sections of each game provide a masterclass in how to repackage the past. The trick here is twofold: reducing games to their most basic moments – *Mario* is all about jumping, *Zelda* is all about exploring – and then refusing to treat them with distant reverence, prodding them awake and reworking them as required. *Twisted*, with its lazy Susan spin on the opening levels of *Super Mario Bros*, remains the series highlight so far – both nostalgic and bizarre.







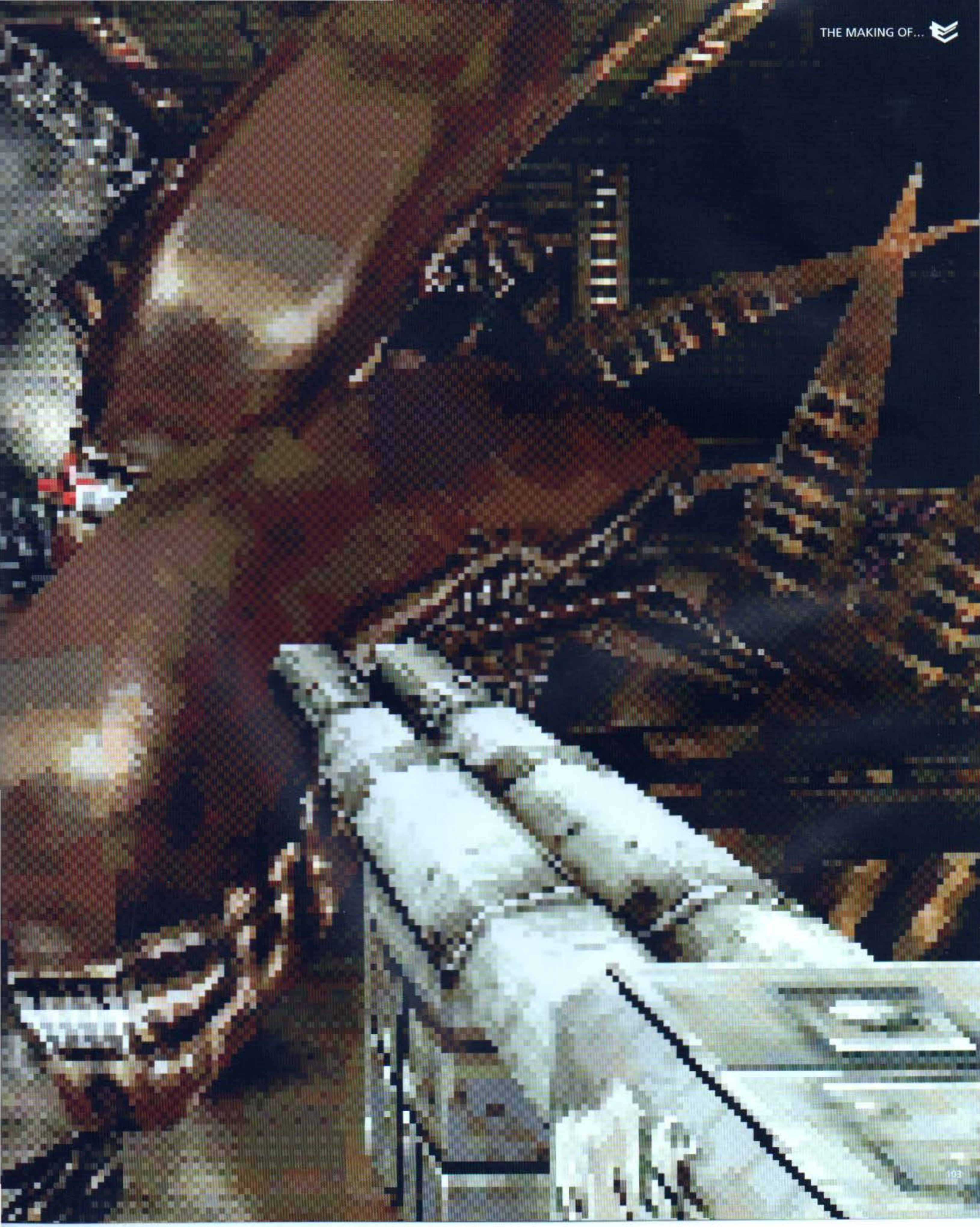
Grid mode allows you to replay any game you've already unlocked either to perfect your strategy for the main game, or to clear a certain number of points

THE MAKING OF…
ALIEN: RESURRECTION

Before it was even released, Argonaut's survival-horror title was capable of inducing sweaty palms, screams in the night and nervous stress – but for the wrong reasons

FORMAT: **PS1** PUBLISHER: **FOX INTERACTIVE** DEVELOPER: **ARGONAUT** ORIGIN: **UK** RELEASE: **2000**







Though the hunting AI of the aliens was a massive cheat, their ability to swarm, overwhelm and drop down from ceilings never failed to make you jump, especially in a darkened room



ALIEN VS MOUSE

Not only was *Alien Resurrection* one of the first FPSes to take advantage of the DualShock's twin-stick design, it also supported the now scarce PSone mouse to great effect. But while this approach was generally appreciated by European gamers, US reviewers slated the game for being too difficult and lacking an auto-aim feature. "Because we wanted the aliens to be moving around anywhere inside the ship, it was vital the player had the freedom to both move and look around independently, hence the twin-stick controls," explains Hargrave. "Once you grasped using a dual-stick control system – pretty standard these days – playing wasn't overly hard. Using a controller and mouse was definitely the best way to play, though – we had a couple of PlayStation mice lying around and so simply decided to make use of them. We also – jokingly – considered supporting both the tank and flight-stick controllers, as we had those lurking around, too."

An anonymous source and ex-Argonaut employee sums up the *Alien Resurrection* development experience thus: "It was a side-on 3D scrolling shooter then one day they decided it was just a big pile of shit, scrapped the old game and started making a firstperson game instead. Maniacs. They ended up working literally night and day to finish it. Some of the team were close to nervous breakdowns."

Not the ideal foundation, but even given the title's release some three years late it still remains one of the most atmospheric and suspenseful movie tie-ins ever. But while it contained cutting-edge audio design, supported mouse input on the PlayStation and had some of the most terrifying underwater sections ever created, its development was anything but smooth.

"One of the biggest problems about the game was that it went on so long," begins **Paul Crocker**, the game's lead designer. "Over its gestation it felt like just about everyone at Argonaut had worked on it. At that time the project seemed to have been going on forever and morale was pretty low. In fact, we'd been convinced to join the project by one of the other designers, who used the trick of getting us blind drunk then telling us that if the project actually came out we'd be heroes and if it failed we couldn't be blamed. We fell for it."

First conceived as a top-down 2.5D *Loaded* clone, *Alien Resurrection* was originally timed for release alongside the movie –



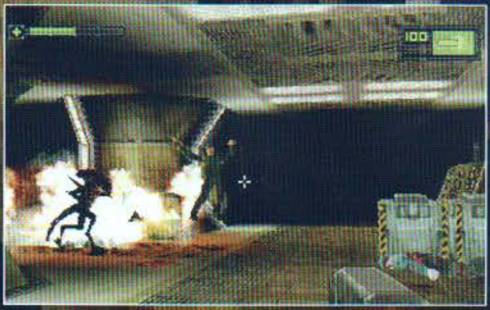
basic prototypes were made and progress was steady. But a year into production, *Tomb Raider* took the industry by storm and incredibly the team shifted to a thirdperson engine with players able to control all the major characters from the movie. Another eight months down the line, something felt very wrong.

"The tech, tools, artwork and source material were great," recalls Crocker, "but something was missing. The game was ticking all the movie licence boxes apart from one: it was not scary. There was no tension when moving down dimly lit corridors, no sudden jumps as aliens leapt from air vents and absolutely no 'shit yourself' moment as you ran out of ammo. Approximately eight months later we still didn't have a game that was fun or scary to play. The team was rapidly falling apart, disillusioned and tired. But a chance meeting to demonstrate the first prototype of the firstperson vent navigation system inspired me to push to make the whole game firstperson. Everyone who saw it loved it and the immersion increased one hundred fold. There was only one problem: we had to convince upper management at Argonaut, who where obviously keen for the game to be finished, and Fox, who were always going to resist another change."

Crocker and senior designer **Chris Tudor-Smith** quickly put together a small test level using assets already created. The idea was to make this short prototype as terrifying and atmospheric as possible. One key ingredient was slowing down the player's speed to increase tension. The introduction of environment details, such as pipes bursting, sirens wailing and face-huggers scurrying into ventilator shafts or dark corners, were also instrumental. When even demoralised Argonaut employees began huddling around monitors displaying the new build, the team knew it had built something special.

"Erik Larson, from Fox, took one look at it and seemed to get as excited as we did," recalls **Simon Hargrave**, the lead programmer. "He phoned his bosses, told them it looked cool, probably put his job on the line, and it was all go. Code-wise, everything was pulled apart and stuck back together again. Much of the core of my PS1 rendering code was kept, as was some of the low-level game framework. A new middle- and top-level memory management and gameplay system was written from the ground up. The tools, editor and collision were totally revamped for the new engine, as we wanted to support seamless streaming in the levels themselves. Some of the art was kept, but most of it was replaced. In fact, the intro and outro movies were probably the only things not to get redone at all."

Understandably, this huge conceptual and technical shift took its toll on an already





Alien Resurrection's cloying sense of despair was largely a clever trick of the audio design, with strangled screams and the hubbub of engine noises adding greatly to the atmosphere – as did the inspired use of the pad's rumble





The electric gun (above) was easily the most enjoyable weapon in the game, allowing you to slowly fry enemies with charged shots, while the laser (below) could totally obliterate the aliens but used up ammo at a frightening rate





They may be small, but face-huggers remained one of the more terrifying enemies in the game, as infection would lead either to a frantic search for an automatic medical station or a horrible death



THE SOUND OF SILENCE

Alien Resurrection was also notable for its phenomenal audio design. A decision was made early on not to include music and instead make the soundscape as naturalistic as possible. Audio designers Jason Bringans and **Justin Scharvona** were responsible for implementing the sound effects and cleverly synchronising them to the level scripting and game design. Faint screams, the voice of Father (the ship's computer), sinister scratching and, of course, the intermittent bleeps from the motion tracker all combined to create the illusion that so much more was happening around the player. "We would 'stage' sound streams to play when the player turned into a new section for the first time," explains Scharvona. "But that sound would never be played again during the game. These set-pieces certainly helped bring the ship alive without the need for the game engine to show anything to the player – it left it all up to their imagination."

exasperated team. "I would say the game took around four years from start to finish," states Tudor-Smith. "*Alien Resurrection* was a difficult birth. The first lead designer was Clive Burdon followed by Jim Mummery, then myself and then Paul Crocker. It was like a relay, only each designer ran until he was exhausted."

With ten levels in total crossing 60 subsections the team quickly began dividing the workload and prototyping each area. With around three weeks assigned to each level, the aim was to build the alpha version in six months. This resulted in a punishing round-the-clock schedule with many core members starting at 7am and not leaving until midnight, sometimes seven days a week. Tudor-Smith was just one of many casualties, and left three months before the game was finished.

But arguably the crunch period had a beneficial effect on the game, producing a sensuously textured recreation of the USS Auriga and some incredibly tight, claustrophobic level design. "One conscious decision we made was to build the areas so they felt like 'real' places rather than build them for gameplay," continues Crocker. "Once we had the rough locations we could add a vent here, move a door there. I viewed each corridor as a way to screw with the player. Sometimes nothing would happen, but players expected to be attacked. Other times players where herded to a button or pickup and then forced to defend the point as numerous Aliens attacked. Silent corridors would enhance the beep of the motion tracker, allowing us to spawn an alien behind you just as you thought you were safe. We then added a 180-degree turn command allowing you to quickly turn and target the attacker."

Even the PlayStation's shortcomings were exploited. "One problem we always had was that the game was too dark," points out Hargrave. "Too dark for easy navigation or spotting your enemies, so we added a flashlight. On the PlayStation it wasn't very successful, so we changed it to a pulsing 'survival beacon' that was attached to the player's chest. The light pulsed in and out, filling a largish area with light and then shrinking it back down. I wanted it to feel like even when you had the light on and you were facing an alien, it could make you jump by emerging from the darkness."

Getting levels to fit into memory was an ongoing struggle, with the code rewritten several times to reduce its size. The team was ruthless, stripping geometry from levels by having areas ascend into darkness (thus removing many ceilings) and amazingly the code connecting the aliens to walls and ceilings was one of the last parts of the game to be completed. Although enemies didn't follow normal AI patterns, they were scripted to leap to navigation points, reorientate and then move to targets. Randomisation was then added to create the illusion that the aliens had sophisticated hunting instincts.

Although finishing the game was weighing heavily on the team, the temptation to add new elements never abated. "The fact that we were on a deadline didn't stop us adding new features," adds Crocker. "Dynamic lighting was added after I bet a coder it wasn't possible. Once in I was then able to add it to scripts so I could change the mood of an area or just add wacky sci-fi corridors filled with runway-style flickering lights. Moving laser grids were added after a conversation between me and Simon while travelling home on the Northern line one day. He went home and brought in the working code on a floppy the next day which was plugged in to the script system. A rumble editor was also added to allow us to make rumble themes for rooms. I had hoped that dropping down into engine rooms would feel different than walking across the cargo room, though again I am not sure anyone but us noticed."

"I viewed each corridor as a way to screw with the player. Sometimes nothing would happen, but players expected to be attacked"

But not everything implemented turned to gold. "The worst thing about the game was the end boss from the movie, The Newborn," concludes Crocker. "It looked like a shaved rabbit-alien half breed and trotted along after you. Fox insisted the game end with it being sucked out into space like in the movie so the entire last section consisted of hiding from a funny monster and then pressing a button. It really was terrible, and apart from the aiming controls is the only thing I would change about the game given the chance."

The team's dedication didn't result in rich rewards, and the lateness of the game inevitably resulted in poor sales and non-existent royalty payments. Fortunately, Argonaut had a review bonus scheme which, due to initial strong scores in the UK, paid out the full amount. Arguably, an **Edge** 8 has never meant so much.

Studio profile

Like Top Trumps, but for game dev

NAME: Electronic Arts Phenomic

DATE FOUNDED: 1997

NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES: 70 (100 by autumn 2007)

KEY STAFF: Boris Kunkel, Dirk Ringe, Volker Wertich, Martin Löhlein, Sven Liebich and Mac Senour



URL: www.phenomic.de

SELECTED SOFTOGRAPHY
The Settlers, Spellforce 1 & 2





Spellforce and its sequel *Spellforce 2: Shadow Wars* combined elements of RTS and RPG gaming, seeing you control multiple heroes and build strong bases

PHENOMIC
AN EA STUDIO



LOCATION: Ingelheim, Germany

CURRENT PROJECTS: Unannounced RTS

ABOUT THE STUDIO

"EA Phenomic, based in Ingelheim near Frankfurt, Germany, is an EA internal development studio that creates innovative RTS and RPG games. As EA's newest studio in Europe, EA Phenomic is working on an as-yet-unannounced RTS.

"Phenomic Game Development was founded in 1997 by Volker Wertich, known by many as the mastermind behind the hugely successful *Settlers* series, where he played a major role in the development of the first and third instalments. In August 2006 Phenomic became an internal development studio of Electronic Arts Inc and was renamed EA Phenomic.

"During development, emphasis is placed on the user experience and making games that are fun to play. As Volker Wertich says: 'For us, innovative, motivating and easily accessible – in a word, phenomenal – gameplay is the most important foundation for developing a game'."



University profile

Like Top Trumps, but for universities

INSTITUTION NAME: Southampton Solent University

NUMBER OF STUDENTS: 11,300

URL: www.solent.ac.uk

CONTACT: enquiries@solent.ac.uk, +44 (0) 0845 676 7000



KEY STAFF

Adam Barton, course leader and senior lecturer in animation;
Mark Cranshaw, course leader and senior lecturer in computing

KEY ALUMNI

Kelly Ford, 3D artist, Relentless Software;
Sean Power, environment artist, Rebellion Games;
Gareth Thomas, 3D artist, Curve Studios







Southampton Solent University offers the chance to develop your skills and understand creative and critical aspects of gameplay and game narrative

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Southampton, Hampshire

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BA (Hons) Computer and Video Games;
BSc (Hons) Computer Games Development;
BA (Hons) Animation;
BA (Hons) Interactive Media (Entertainment)

INSIDE VIEW: MARTYN TAYLOR, BA (HONS) COMPUTER AND VIDEO GAMES



"I have just finished the final year of BA (Hons) Computer and Video Games at Southampton Solent University, and really enjoyed the three years of hard work. The course taught me the foundations of game art and design during the first two years, with modules focusing on 2D animation principles, character design and game design documents over the first year.

"The second year focused on 3D Studio Max, including level design, character modelling and animation using our understanding of animation principles from the first year.

"During the final year we worked on self-titled major projects, which involved designing a game from scratch through pre-production and design document units, followed by asset creation with the use of 3D Studio Max, Photoshop and the university's own in-house game engine (Odis). I worked with another student using Valve's Source engine. With the help of an outside coder we were able to create a fully working *Half-Life 2* multiplayer modification within three months.

"All the staff are very knowledgeable and, with games industry backgrounds, are able to give good solid creative criticism and were always pushing us hard to produce high quality work. As students we were always encouraged to be creative and imaginative rather than being spoon-fed information from lecturers. The course is enjoyable, exciting, interesting and I feel it has very much prepared me for a very competitive industry."

Codeshop

Tracking developments in development

Gaming makes friends

You're not anyone if you're not plugged in to social networking. That's why US mobile tech firm Qualcomm is strengthening its BREW



Mike Yuen, head of Qualcomm's gaming group

Thanks to the success of Xbox Live and continued momentum of Web 2.0 in the form of *LittleBigPlanet* and PlayStation Home, surely most game publishers and developers know by now that online social networking is the big thing they should be working on. After all, what are online games from *World Of WarCraft* to *Second Life* except flashy graphical versions of Facebook, albeit with a more straightforward level-based reputation system than reality?

But while mains-powered consoles and PCs have shaped the early progression of social network gaming, mobile-based technologies promise to bring something different to the mix. MySpace, Facebook and Flickr are now mobile-enabled, for example, while SMS-based Twittering is driving a new world of minutiae.

The problem, of course, is that when it comes to gaming, the mobile market is fragmented in a much more complex way than the console, let alone the PC space, with national and operator barriers as well as potential handset incompatibilities to be worked out.

US mobile technology company Qualcomm reckons its BREW Gaming Signature Solution could overcome some of these problems.

For one thing, it provides a hardware technology foundation for handsets in terms of basic components such as processors, screen size and high-speed network connections. Combined with this, its proprietary BREW development platform (which stands for Binary Runtime Environment for Wireless) makes life easier for game and application developers.

What's getting **Mike Yuen**, the head of Qualcomm's gaming group, really excited, however, is the way it will bring mobile gaming from being a niche activity, hidden several button clicks away, right into people's contact lists.

"We're building this service because this is where we think the wireless industry is heading"

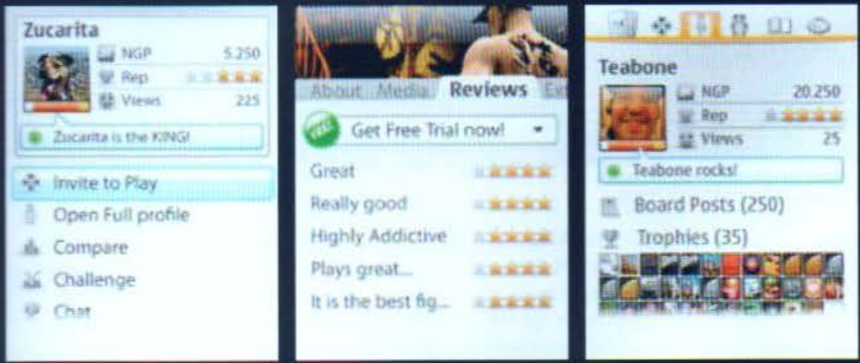
"This is the community area of the service," he says, flicking between screens on his phone, which is running an early live implement of the Gaming Signature Solution. "Here's your buddy list, which as well as the usual avatar icons, gamer points, and tags, shows when your friends were last online and what games they're playing. You can drill down further and check out what badges they've earned. There's also an area for challenges, which you can send to the people on your list. They don't have to be complex. It could just be: 'Who can get the top score on a certain game by the end of the weekend?' We're looking to add features where you can play people for points as well."

And it's this level of fluid interaction, from user-generated challenges to forums and lobbies and through to operator-run competitions and promotions, that Yuen hopes will provide an all-round boost for mobile gaming.

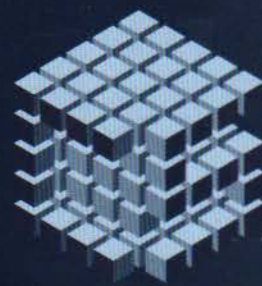
"Like Xbox Live, we'll have a free



While there's plenty of interest in cool-looking phones – this Qualcomm Slingshot reference device generated plenty of attention a couple of years ago – the company is now focusing on software



The functionality exposed in the BREW Gaming Signature Solution can be seen in this screen, which lists recent games played as well as showing the gamer's avatar, most recently won badge and points (or stars) total. Other areas take you to the game catalogue area, where you can browse or buy new games, and the multiplayer area, which features the games' lobbies and forums



mode and a paid, or premium, mode – and we think even the guys using the free mode will buy more mobile games, because of our points system," he says. "If you're grinding through level 20 of a 25-level game, for $5 it will make sense to buy another game and burn through its early levels really fast."

Another interesting option is the badge system. "We'll have simple badges such as: 'You're in the top ten of the leaderboard', but where it gets really interesting is when publishers, say EA or Gameloft, start creating specific badges such as 'The longest drive in *Tiger Woods*' or 'The fastest lap in *Need For Speed*'," Yuen explains. "We want to allow the publishers to pass this sort of metadata back to the servers so we can access information to create these very tuned badges. We believe it will be a key part of the gaming service."

Other options could include event-based badges such as a World Cup or Olympic badge. He also expects operators to use such opportunities within their wider marketing campaigns.

"From our perspective, it's critical that operators plan out what they want to do, whether it's involving existing partners and setting up say, Best Buy, Wal-Mart or Aston Martin-sponsored tournaments where they will give away real and digital prizes. This isn't about taking the technology we provide and launching it within a month. Successful services need to be managed and run with regular promotions and prompts to the community," he argues.

That's one of the reasons you won't be able to dive into the service until the middle of 2008 at the earliest. Qualcomm's still working on the back-end server technology too; something Yuen expects to be completed by the end of the year, although as is the way with such services, it will be continually upgraded with new features being added throughout its lifespan.

And as for the question of when (or even whether) the BREW Gaming Signature Solution will be available in the UK, Yuen's currently tight-lipped. Historically, BREW has always been a US-centric technology, although recently the networking side of the platform has been unbundled, meaning that it can be deployed elsewhere, with Italian operator TIM the first European client. More recently, mobile network 3 has also signed a deal to use BREW technology, although it's not yet specified which countries it will be used in.

But taking a generalist overview, Yuen states change has to happen: "We're building this service because this is where we think the wireless industry is heading. It's not about better chipsets and faster networks. That will keep happening, but the service concept is what is driving the future."



The screens above display the amount of information that will be supplied about a game before you even purchase it, including screenshots and text descriptions. There could also be an option to include reviews from other players



Aside from the social aspects of the BREW GSS, another advantage is the high quality of the games it enables. Gameloft's *Brothers In Arms 3D* won the best BREW game award at Qualcomm's recent BREW 2007 conference



What's Nokia doing?

Of course, among mobile technology companies, it's not just Qualcomm that's shifting its focus from hardware technology into software and services. The most notable switcher is Nokia, which has replaced its dedicated N-Gage handsets with its next-gen client solution. This will be rolled out across most of the company's third edition Series 60 phones during the autumn.

In a similar way to Qualcomm's BREW platform, it will use a unified C++ code base to make life a lot easier for game developers to make high quality products. The N-Gage software dev kit will also standardise features such as high scores, digital rights management and the implementation of social networking functions like game invites, lobby systems and multiplayer modes. Meshing with such gamer-focused features will be Nokia's digital distribution channel for mobile games, which, as well as allowing you to download demos and share games with your friends, will include pay-as-you-play, subscription and rental options.



BY DAVID DOAK

PERFECT DOAK An insider's view of the industry

MY E3 2007

I lost my E3 virginity ten years ago when the *GoldenEye* team were whisked away to steamy downtown Atlanta to whore our wares. That time it was hot and wet which, as Robin Williams might have said is nice if you're with a lady, but ain't no good if you're losing your voice and sanity shouting at Borat's cousin from Unofficial Nintendo Magazine Khazakstan who's never even heard of your game in an alternately dark and retina-melting convention center (sic) with the EA sound system of death shredding your eardrums. To its credit, though, at least Atlanta isn't LA where we've gathered like lemmings for the last seven years. If you've never been to the LA Convention Center, what can I say? 'Don't bother' would be a start.

But I digress. Fast forward through a blurry decade of whoring *TimeSplitters* and *Second Sight* to a largely indifferent audience and, gosh, well, we're all better now. No more downtown craziness, this year the big boys decided to call off their annual multimillion-dollar pissing contest and agreed to suck E3 out to Santa Monica where all the beautiful people are (Christ knows how they thought we'd fit in).

Of course, the games industry, consummate bunch of professionals that we are, couldn't even get that right. Publishers got twitchy and a whole bunch of independent events sprang up to fill the void in an orgy of bizarrely co-operative march-stealing centred on one week in San Francisco earlier this year. Free Radical's Gallic chums eponymously christened their jamboree Ubidays SF ('quelle surprise' as I believe they now say in Montreal) and the *Haze* team duly worked their butts and fingers to the proverbial, lovingly crafting an ass-kicking fourplayer online co-op demo to delight the masses. We came, we saw, we demoed (our screenwriter, Rob Yescombe, even broke his toe in an auto-erotic hotel room mishap) and then we slowly dropped our jaws as *Assassin's Creed* just showed a video and got a better reaction. I guess most people would rather look at Jade Raymond than a beardy hippy like me.

A week before E3 'lite' and suddenly it's panic stations again as we suddenly decide to go there and demo the game – 'but not the bit you showed at Ubidays because everyone's seen that already and they'll think it's crap if you make them look at it again'.

Cue another frantic weekend for the *Haze* team as they scrabble together a build, which is stuffed on a dev PC for me to carry overseas while experiencing the unbridled joy that is post-9/11 transatlantic air travel. Olympic-scale queuing at Heathrow and then, 11 hours later at LAX, the Homeland Security dudes have invented a new and even more annoying game. Bless their imperial cotton socks, this time they're sticking their noses into the aircraft and telling you to hold out your papers like an Ellis Island refugee or piss off back to wherever you came from. Like human cattle, we all comply.

> Cliffy B dropped by to see Haze – he liked the drugs and the violence. Mr Miyamoto dropped by to see Haze – and he didn't

Compulsory fingerprints, questions, mugshots and half an hour later I've somehow managed to get a cab down to the Loews Hotel in Santa Monica to 'set up'. It's 8pm local time, which is 4am equivalent for me, but that's OK because developers don't ever sleep anyway.

An hour later, the panic's over and I'm in the bar with Kjell and Nate from Ubi US. They're sound guys (in fact Kjell and I go way, way back to Eidos and the *TimeSplitters* days) and after a couple of bottles of Sierra Nevada, nachos, sliders and a view out on to the twilight on Santa Monica pier, I'm almost relaxed.

Bed. Not sleep. Wake up. 5am. Sleep. Not sleep. Alarm. Snooze. Alarm. Shit!

Wednesday, the first day of the show, except it doesn't actually feel like a show because we're in a small suite in a hotel on Santa Monica beach and there's no one there to see the game.

And that's because they're all at the Sony conference where they're hearing that *Haze* is a PS3 exclusive among other things that received more press coverage – but what do I care? It's not as if I have some vested interest. Ahem.

OK, at this point I ought to 'fess up: it did get better. Over the next couple of days a steady stream of people came to see *Haze* and I sang and danced and even answered the "How many guns has it got?" question (although I think I just made up a number). Cliffy B dropped by to see *Haze* – he liked the drugs and the violence. Mr Miyamoto dropped by to see *Haze* – and he didn't. But at least everyone seemed to get the point that we're trying to make an FPS wargame that makes you think. (More fools we.)

In the evenings I hung out with my old chum Laura from Fortyseven Communications and had some great food and embittered chats about the state of the games industry. Best of all, over some free drinks, I got to see a game I actually liked even though I'm a cynical, jaded old bastard (*Zack And Wiki* on the Wii – buy it).

In conclusion, my enduring E3 2007 memory will be of looking out of the hotel picture window at the Pacific surf, sun and sand and realising that we had all chosen to sit inside in the dark playing videogames. Nice one – see you all next year.

David Doak co-founded Free Radical Design and is making Haze. *He's just turned 40 and is having a mid-life crisis*



Illustration: tstakes



BY MR BIFFO

BIFFOVISION Grumble feature enabled

LOSS OF INNOCENCE

Although I'm not exactly an old man just yet, the age they call middle isn't all that far away. Having spent my 20s thinking I was in my 50s, and my early 30s behaving like a 17-year-old, I feel like I've finally achieved a nice balance; I'm 36 this year, and at last I feel my age.

Looking back, I have been playing videogames for nigh-on 28 years, or thereabouts. I started at the tail end of the Atari VCS era, and continued playing via a ZX Spectrum, Atari ST, Master System, Game Boy, and pretty much every system that has been released from that point onwards.

On occasion, being a gamer has felt a bit like that sequence in The Time Machine, where the guy is strapped into his seat, and watches the dress shop window opposite his house.

You know the bit I mean – fashions cycle through a kaleidoscope of colours and hemlines lengths, then London gets bombed, and rebuilt, before the time traveller becomes walled inside a volcano, and gets the runs really badly. Except: for this metaphor to work he'd have to be sat outside a branch of Game. And he wouldn't need to be strapped into a time machine for the window display to blur past in the blink of an eye; he could just stand in front of it, and watch things change in realtime.

Compare the games market of today to the one of 20 years ago, and it's unrecognisable. Compare it to the one of five years ago, and it's still pretty much unrecognisable. Technology moves at a lung-crumpling speed, and while developers can create whole worlds – with flowing water, and swaying trees, and people with glinty, twinkly eyes – and cram them on to a DVD, there's one thing they will never be able to synthesise. And that thing is this thing: nostalgia.

One of the saddest aspects of growing old as a gamer is that the games lose a certain degree of mystique. When I was younger it felt as if games were a window on to elsewhere, that they'd been punted into our universe from some other dimension. The people behind them were alchemists – weird geniuses with their brains wired into some elemental, unexplainable form of inspiration. Of course, thanks to the retrogaming boom of the last few years we all now know that Matthew Smith and The Oliver Twins et al weren't sorcerers at all – just computer boffin-y blokes who had watched far too much Monty Python.

I suppose this is just a consequence of getting older, and I suppose it happens to a similar degree with music or films. My appetite for music is voracious, and I've recently come to realise that I've been chasing a high that I'll never find again, short of losing the last 20-odd years of my memories. Our taste in music tends to get locked in around the age of 14, and I'd argue that it's the same with games. When I think about the games which really define me and my tastes, they're the ones I played in my early teens.

> "When I was younger it felt as if games were a window on to elsewhere, punted into our universe from some other dimension"

That's not to say I spent the subsequent two decades finding games lacking. Far from it, in fact – in many respects, games are better than ever. Nevertheless, there hasn't been a game released since about 1985 that has made the hairs stand up on the back of my parts.

Take the *Zelda* series, for example. I've realised that – as the series progresses – I've actually found each subsequent game less immersive than the one that preceded it. I may not have been there at the very start of the franchise, but had I played those very early *Zelda* games, I have no doubt that they'd have blown my mind. With *Twilight Princess* I feel like I'm playing a game, whereas with *A Link To The Past* I felt like I'd been transported somewhere. Conversely, if I was a 13-year-old playing *Twilight Princess* for the first time I dare say my point of view would be very different to the baggage-obscured one I brought to it as a 35-year-old.

It's as if, as I've grown older, I can glimpse the wizards behind the curtains. I'm less inclined to buy the illusion that the game makers are selling. I guess that we, as a species, begin with a surplus of imagination that gets depleted as we age, and get weighed down by the detritus of life.

It's like looking out of a plane window at night, as you're coming into land. From up there the lights look like diamonds, the streets dark and mysterious, hiding adventure and secrets. And then you land, and you can see that they're the same cracked and graffiti-scarred streets they always were; there's no romance, just ordinary lives, populated by ordinary, miserable people trying to pay their bills.

I dunno. I'm not sure I can even put my finger on what it is that I find missing in today's games. Who knows? Maybe it isn't all nostalgia; maybe even today's web-savvy teens are clued up on the fact that games exist to make money for the people who make them.

Maybe it wasn't just me who was more innocent back when I first started playing games– maybe it was the industry itself.

Mr Biffo co-founded Digitiser, Channel 4's Teletext-based videogames section, and now writes mainly for television



inbox



Issue 178

ONLINE OFFLINE

Choice cuts from Edge Online's discussion forum

Topic: Is Killzone 2 pivotal for PS3?

Sadly, I feel the bar was set so high with those prerendered 'targets' that I'm just all too confident I'll be left deflated.
danclarke

Look at *MotorStorm* on PS3 compared to the original CG E3 vid. I think we can expect the same differences with *Killzone 2*. No doubt it will look great, but better than *Gears*? That's a tall order.
Turtle O Wurtle

Funny thing about *Killzone*. I can remember all the character names and the story but it wasn't actually all that breathtaking a game. I think I only really played it through because I was enjoying the story. The gameplay was a bit poor and the AI was shocking. The only difference between an Elite and a normal grunt was that they would occasional duck, only problem was they tended to duck when they weren't behind cover. Saying that, we could all be surprised by *Killzone 2*.
ScotsWahey

After several weeks of trawling WH Smith, I've finally managed to find a copy of your weighty 100 Best edition and lug it home. I can't say I particularly care that you capitulated to market forces and tried to put the selection of games into an (inevitably meaningless) order. What we have is 100 great games and 100 essays on them – that's really all that matters.

This said, as your remit for selection seems to be games that you would go back and play today, some of the entries initially surprised me.

It's probably the games that operate on a few simple rules that have the greatest longevity – it's these that will be in 100 Best lists years from now

Would I really pick up *Robotron* again? It's a game worth remembering and certainly worth talking about – but surely there have been imitators which improve on its formula? But then, as I looked at **Edge**'s reasons for selecting a particular instalment of a series rather than the latest, it became clear that such games' successors often see 'improvement' in terms of a simple addition of features, and that this frequently dilutes the purity of the initial offering rather than complementing it.

In fact, it's probably the games that operate on a few simple rules that have the greatest longevity – it's these games that will be appearing in 100 Best lists years from now, and not flash-in-the-pan titles like *Crackdown*, upon which further iterations will always improve. *Lemmings*, *Pac-Man*, *Tetris* or *Puzzle Bobble*: the fact that these games eke out their brilliance from a small number of parameters is that which gives them elegance and timelessness.

All you'd need to improve *Crackdown* would be better car physics, or more interesting fighting moves – you could tweak any one element of that game and make it better. And this is why the comparison you make between the current 100 Best Videogames and the list **Edge** drew up back in 2000 is such a useful exercise – because it reveals which qualities are enduring, and which are simply a snapshot of gaming's endless progress upwards and onwards.
Jeff Crowley

In view of the firestorm of protest that your Top 100 has inevitably provoked on various forums, I'd just like to say thank you for producing such a beautiful love letter to gaming.

Yes, I'm sure that everybody can come up with games that they think should have been on the list (I've always had a strange, unaccountable love for *Fur Fighters*) but that's the joy of these things. They're there to provoke debate and to remind you of happy nights spent playing *Mario Kart* with friends you've not been in touch with for years. They're there to nudge you into the darkest corners of the cupboard for that copy of *Puzzle Bobble*. They're there to make you rue the day you decided to trade in *Symphony Of The Night* on the assumption that you'd always be able to pick it up again for a fiver in a few years time, damn it. Still, there are always the memories...
Richard Brind

Edge, I think I am losing touch with what a good game is. A proud and experienced gamer of over 20 years, on consoles and PC, I have recently found my gaming nirvana. Only to be told by you and every other 'professional' reviewer out there that said game is rubbish. I am getting the same buzz off this game as I did when we used to gather round the Mega Drive for round after round of *NFL Hockey*, *FIFA*, *Street Fighter II* or *Speedball 2*. Like those games, I am finding this a superbly refined, competitive game of skill, but also a lot of fun. I don't wish to rant about the merits of the game, but I do wish to make an observation that it appears from the text of the review that **Edge** reviewed and scored this game without playing it enough to see all it offers.

For any other magazine this may be expected, but from **Edge**, whose scores carry so much weight in the games industry, especially the marketing and procurement sides, your final verdict can physically dictate what we will be playing years from now. It amazes me that *Generic Same-Again Shooter 5*, *No Fun Racer 2*, or another diagonally-challenged (when are EA or Konami going to notice the analogue sticks and allow us to run and pass where we want, not just diagonally?) football game get higher marks than this. You are always bemoaning the lack of



The best letter wins a DS Lite

imagination, risk, freshness and fun in recent games yet you are also helping to perpetuate the safe, rigid formulas that are crippling the gaming industry. Relax, take a step back, stop looking for faults. Remember what gaming is about.

The game in question is *Shadowrun*, by the way.

Paul Forsythe

It's always difficult to give a universal judgement to the experience of playing an online game that is ultimately defined by the other players who invest time in it. The framework in which the social play you're enjoying is taking place is easier to quantify, and, frankly, there are better examples out there.

With eager anticipation of Nintendo's E3 press conference I had high hopes that Nintendo would be geared up for a great line-up of games for the next 12 months. I have been bitterly disappointed. I have loved Nintendo ever since owning a NES and thought the one thing Nintendo did right with the GameCube was appealing to its userbase and releasing games that hardcore gamers wanted to play – *Chibi Robo, Fire Emblem, Mario, Zelda, Metroid* et al. The E3 line-up showed that they have forgotten about the core Nintendo fans with games such as *Wii Fit* taking a prominent role in the type of audience Nintendo are trying to reach out to. I do understand the need to branch out to non-gamers, but should this be at the expense of their most loyal fans? Sony and Microsoft have gotten their act together and a lot of their games are simultaneously released worldwide, with Sony taking another step forward and actually enabling region-free on firstparty games, while Nintendo Europe are still plagued with release dates being pushed back with the likes of *Fire Emblem* and *Super Paper Mario*. I agree with Biffo's article last month, and my Wii is also gathering dust. After the promising and innovative experience of *Zelda* and *Wii Sports* there has been nothing else to be excited about and I am having second thoughts about my purchase. I have found Microsoft's and Sony's E3 conference to be of a solid nature and they seem to have plenty of games which appeal to me. Although I do own a PlayStation 2, I am now considering preordering the Xbox 360 Elite. The glimmer of hope I have left is the Tokyo Game Show where, hopefully, Nintendo will release some more info.

Ruman Behlim



Paul Forsythe takes issue with our review of *Shadowrun*, and hits one of the big questions in reviewing. Not for nothing are we warned: 'experience may change during online play'

We're certainly hearing some exciting talk about TGS. Fingers crossed...

By refusing to license Manhunt 2 after it was awarded an Adults Only rating in the US, the manufacturers have taken a backward step

Of all the fallout from the recent *Manhunt 2* controversy, for me the most disappointing aspect has been the reaction of the three console manufacturers. By refusing to license the game after it was awarded an Adults Only rating in the US, the manufacturers have taken a disappointing backward step in the development of gaming, given fuel to the anti-game lobby and also raised difficult questions about cultural attitudes to 'adult' material.

Firstly, the decision not to license games rated AO will be seen by those opposed to gaming as a tacit admission that games are, and always will be, primarily for children. Given the recent strides that have been made to make gaming more attractive to non-gamers, such an admission is hardly going to make that task easier. This level of self-censorship is also unique amongst the creative industries and will doubtless stifle creativity. One cannot imagine the major record labels, film studios or publishing houses banding together and deciding that everything they release must be suitable for children.

The decision is also disappointing and worrying as it effectively makes the American ESRB the world's ultimate regulator when it comes to games. Given that US censors are traditionally far more tolerant towards violence than bad language or nudity (compare 24 to Janet Jackson's 'wardrobe malfunction') it can hardly be said that they represent the global benchmark of taste and decency.

Regardless of whether *Manhunt 2* deserves to be banned or awarded an AO rating, and it may well do, the console manufacturers have missed an opportunity to stand by their developers and show that gaming is becoming a more mature and adult medium. Instead, they have handed victory to the opponents of gaming without any debate and shown that the American market, and American values, are king.

Neil Marshall

Debate is indeed the key here. Requiring less debate is the fact that you've just won yourself a DS Lite.

It surprised me that your article about piracy in **Edge** 177 gave very little attention to the issue of the price of games, especially since price is the main reason for parallel markets in something that is not illegal – like games. I see three key aspects: the high price of games, price differentiation by content and the lower price/higher quality trend on hi-tech commodities.

Games have a high price that prevents some gamers from buying what they want and forcing them into the secondhand market or piracy. And companies can't even complain about this – the alternative is to completely lose the players who aren't able to spend the money they, the sellers, want spent on games. So piracy at least keeps those consumers interested in games, and they will buy some games later instead of giving up gaming.

Price differentiation is something vital to right and fair pricing. It's odd

Continued

F

Topic: PC Gaming is doomed (again)

I've recently got an uber new PC, and decided to get *Stalker*. All was fine until I tried to play it. Nothing displayed except the skybox. So, after about 30 minutes of trawling through forums, I change my Nvidia control panel. Success! It now works, although it crashes about 5-10 minutes in, whenever I try to save. Apparently this is a Vista problem, but this is just why PC gaming isn't as widespread as console gaming. It just doesn't have the same quality control or ease of use. As a customer, I've bought this product and expect it to work. Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm just going to play some *Halo 2* on my 360.

peter117

If PCs could operate as easy as consoles I have no doubt it would become my platform of choice.

Red Dave

I agree that PC gaming is not hassle free as console gaming and it probably never will. Thatis the cost you pay for open ended technology. But once you get the hang of it, you get rewarded for your troubles. Besides, you kids have it easy. You should be around the DOS days where you had to mess about with EMS and XMS memory settings and IRQ conflicts. Ah, those were the days!

mandelbrot78

This generation, I've just taken one look at the DX10 crew poncing around, and thought, fook this. On paper, my system should be able to handle stuff at least in the last year, but the reality is that it looks pretty poor, considering how quick and easy it is to slip in the console equivalent disk.

Galaxy

I spend more time downloading patches, updating drivers and fiddling with the graphics card settings than playing games. But I still love my PC to bits.

Kow

that all games cost roughly the same, even if they offer very different levels of quality and longevity to the player. It simply doesn't matter if it's good, bad, short or long – it will cost us the same. Shouldn't the price reflect that? Are companies sure the product they are selling isn't completely overpriced and begging for some pirate intervention?

In a previous **Edge**, someone was wondering if people running the games business know anything of what they're doing. Computers get better and cheaper, mobile phones get better and cheaper, consoles and games don't get cheaper while getting better. Making products for the masses and acting like it's a luxury item is a course of action that will surely cause problems, and piracy is not the biggest of them. Nintendo has made some effort in this area, but there's still a lot to do. The pricing policies of games companies support piracy by overpricing their product. And piracy supports companies, preventing them from losing clients who are aware that what they're offering isn't worth that much money. And there are even those gamers, like me, that don't resort to piracy but buy mostly on Ebay, buying games that aren't sales to any company. If they want to fight piracy the tactic is quite simple: just make it cheaper. Consumers prefer the original if they aren't being ripped off.
Daniel Perna

F

Topic: Redundant gaming lexicon

You know, like POKE. Nobody says POKE any more. It's all 'Action Replay codes' which is far less eloquent. I miss 'coin-op conversion' too. What other examples of redundant gaming lexicon really need to make a comeback?
Blocks100

Another great one was how many screens a game had, remember? And parallax.
Lukeim64

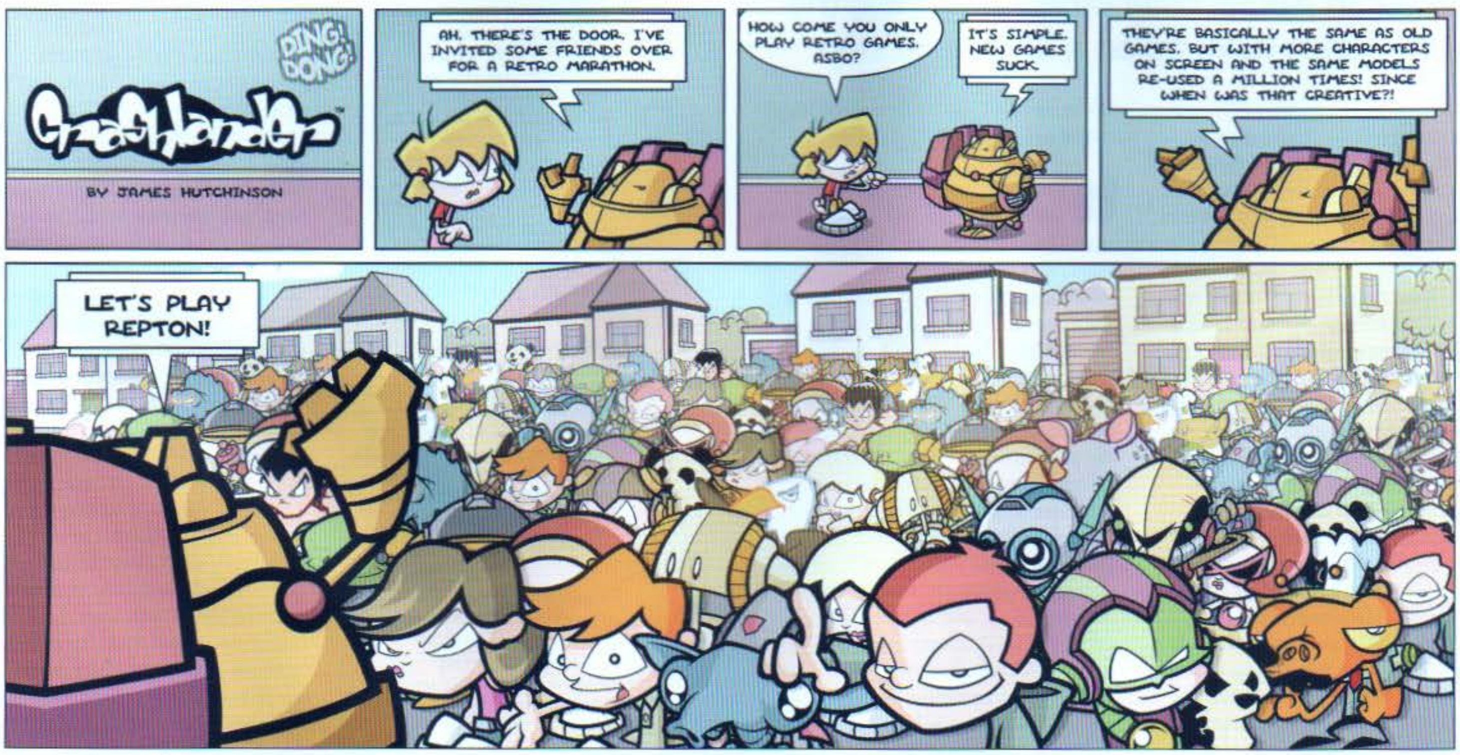
Arcade perfect.
bigbrick

I remember the good old NES days where reviews would need to tell you if there was any 'sprite flicker' or 'dodgy collision detection' in a game. These days it's all complaints about brown textures and too much bloom lighting.
Photoboy

I own a 360 and Wii – highly impressive systems, and yet by far the most use I've had from them is in playing downloadable games and old classics. I'm not complaining – it's a great pleasure for me to download the old SNES classics and some new titles for relatively little cash. It suits my lifestyle perfectly in fact, as thanks to life's vagaries I don't really have the time or spare cash any more to dedicate to £40 or £50 epics. As a longterm reader of **Edge**, and being used to good blanket coverage of gaming matters, I want to know why you're not covering these services in depth. I've noticed over the last few issues that several of the original titles have been covered, but only in half-page reviews, and there's no precedent for looking at the classic titles. Are there any plans?
Ed Ransley

We've always been focused on the here and now (and the future, of course), so our review section covers only new games. But we will continue to examine the heritage of gaming through the likes of Time Extend and features.

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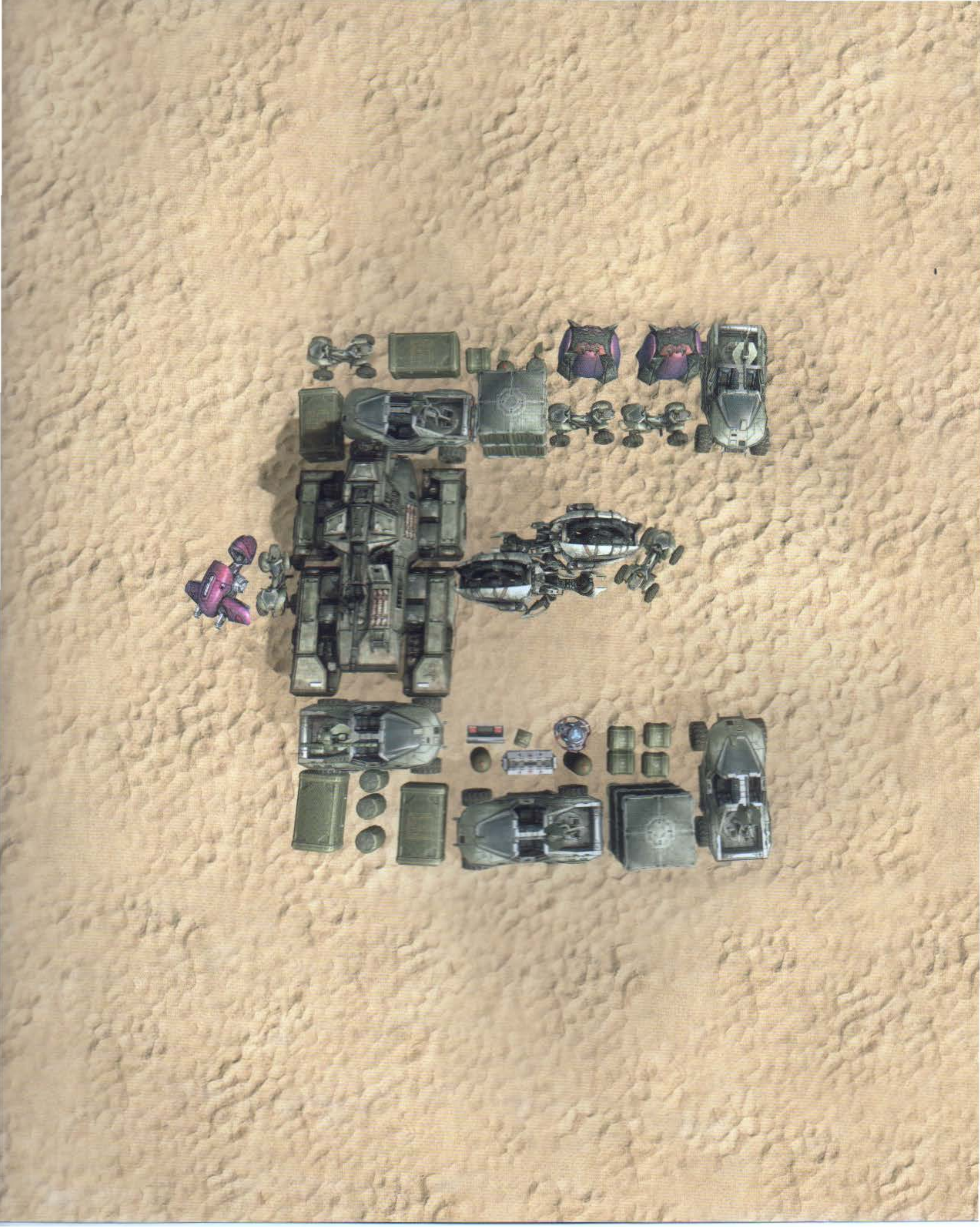


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